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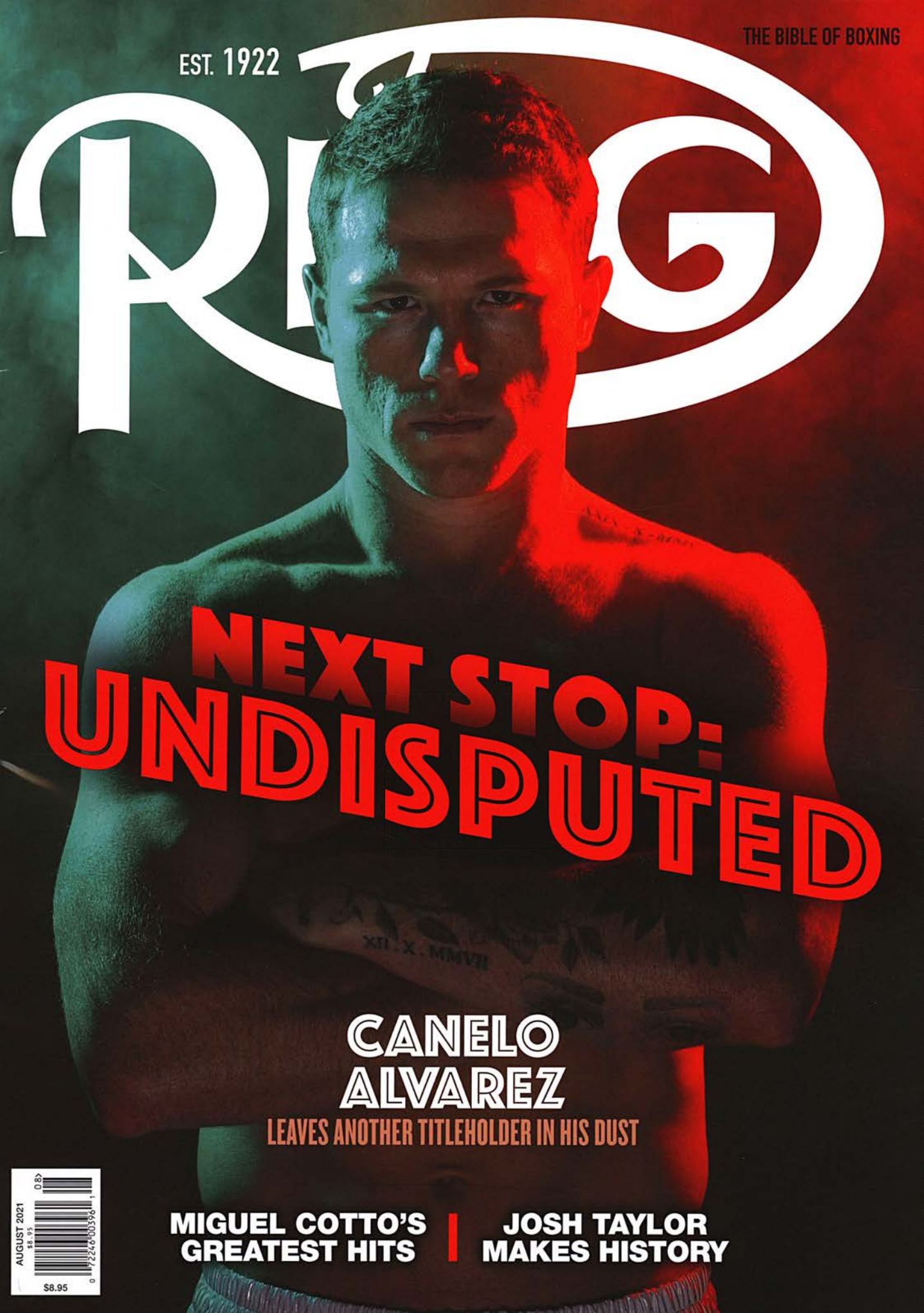

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Canelo Alvarez was back and so was his loyal fanbase, which packed the AT&T Stadium in Texas to see the super middleweight champion face Billy Joe Saunders.

COVER PHOTO BY ED MULHOLLAND/MATCHROOM

Former 118-pound beltholder Luis Nery (left) picked up a vacant title at 122 but couldn't hold onto it when he faced the much larger Brandon Figueroa, who stopped him in seven rounds.

JOHN MCCOY

Mayweather-Paul will be a money-spinner, but very few hardcore fans are interested.

IS BOXING JOINING THE CIRCUS?

The aftermath of the Jake Paul vs. Ben Askren PPV has me thinking that Triller is on to something. The 18-35 demographic apparently has little interest in watching three or four dudes in suits sit at a desk while a boxing match takes place. They need more. I stubbornly did not watch the event. I love boxing and I want more people to watch and enjoy my favorite sport. Maybe promoters need to hire some young blood to book some entertainment to add to the spectacle. The Super Bowl has quite the halftime show. Wrestlemania always has celebrities involved to create a buzz and attract the mainstream. The Rumble in the Jungle had a music festival with James Brown, the Spinners and more. Making a big fight a "circus" should, perhaps, be embraced for all the pageantry and excitement that can bring. That way, maybe the hardworking boxers that make boxing so great can start earning as much money as a YouTuber.

Drew Adkins
Red Deer, Alberta, Canada

I was talking to an acquaintance who is a high-end sports gambler and I told him that Manny Pacquiao just signed to fight Errol Spence Jr. The conversation went like this:

"Manny is still fighting? That is incredible. What is he, like 50 years old? Who is he fighting?"

"Errol Spence Jr."

"Errol Spence? Is he any good?"

"He might be the pound-for-pound best boxer in the world."

"Huh. I never heard of him. Hey, did you hear that Floyd Mayweather is fighting Logan Paul? That should be a good one."

This to me represents the state of boxing in America.

In order for a young Cassius Clay to be taken seriously, he needed to beat an aging great, Sonny Liston. The same can be said of Oscar De La Hoya when he beat Julio Caesar Chavez or even Mike Tyson beating Larry Holmes. There is that moment when the older fighter from the previous generation takes one more swing at history and fights the next generation of greatness. This to me is what the sport needs from their greatest, that moment when they push their sport forward and sacrifice themselves for the sport that made them rich and famous. However, they don't just hand over their legacy to the younger generation. They fight to the last bell to continue their own legacy. I

CLIFF HAWKINS

thought Pacquiao was fighting his last fight two years ago against Keith Thurman, but I was wrong and his legacy continued. If his legacy continues after fighting Spence Jr, there is no denying that he has to be put up there with the all-time greats.

The sport of boxing in America is dying, and the only names that are still recognizable to the majority of Americans right now are Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather. If Errol beats Manny and beats him convincingly, there will be a third fighter that they will want to see again. That makes a Spence vs. Terence Crawford fight one that Americans will want to watch, especially if Crawford is billed as better than Spence or at least as his equal. When was the last time Americans were excited to watch a REAL boxing match that didn't involve Floyd or Manny? And this is why, as a boxing purist, you have to love Manny. His drive to continue his legacy is what the boxing world needs right now. Win or lose, thank you Manny.

Floyd Mayweather is fighting Logan Paul for an easy payday so he can continue his gambling legacy. Thanks for nothing, Floyd, from all real boxing fans.

Steve Anderson
East Brunswick, N.J.

ROCK VS. MAULER

When I started reading referee Ron Lipton's mythical matchup on Jack Dempsey vs. Rocky Marciano (May 2021), I could not put it down. It was like boxing magic for me to read, it was so real.

I used to listen to my father and grandfather tell me how Dempsey would have beaten any heavyweight in history. My grandfather saw the Dempsey vs. Firpo fight in person in 1923, and my uncle saw Dempsey in Toledo against Willard. Both of them never missed a fight and still swore Dempsey was the one guy who would win against all of them, like Ray Arcel had been quoted as saying in the article. I only wish they were both still with us to see this realistic mythical matchup in The Ring Magazine.

The tremendous fast start by Dempsey, who had such power in both hands, I also believe would have enabled Jack to prevail in a first meeting, as Rocky started out a bit slow at times. I was also in agreement with what Ron said in the beginning of the article, that in a rematch there could be a different outcome with Rocky prevailing on endurance.

Keep up the great writing, Mr. Lipton; you have a unique touch. I am looking forward to your next one.

Eddie Caldwell
Chicago

I always like a posthumous fight story between two great boxers, but Marciano went down for the count in the second round! The only thing that would justify a thrashing like this is taking into consideration that Dempsey was only dead 38 years while Marciano was dead for 52 years.

Mike Donovan
Keystone Heights, Fla.

GOOD ONE

I vividly recall watching *The* *Mod Squad* as a 9-year-old with my dad. Truth be told, Linc and Artemus Gordon were my TV heroes as a kid. In one *Mod Squad* episode, there was an older fighter looking to make a comeback. Our family was always a boxing family, so even as a young kid, the story line appealed to me. I remembered the fighter's name was "Candy Joe" (I do not recall the last name). I asked my dad, "Is this guy a boxer?" He responded, "The best that ever got in the ring."

It was Sugar Ray Robinson … "Candy Joe" … Now I get it. Creative writing … LOL.

David Magnusson, Chief of Police
El Portal, Fla.

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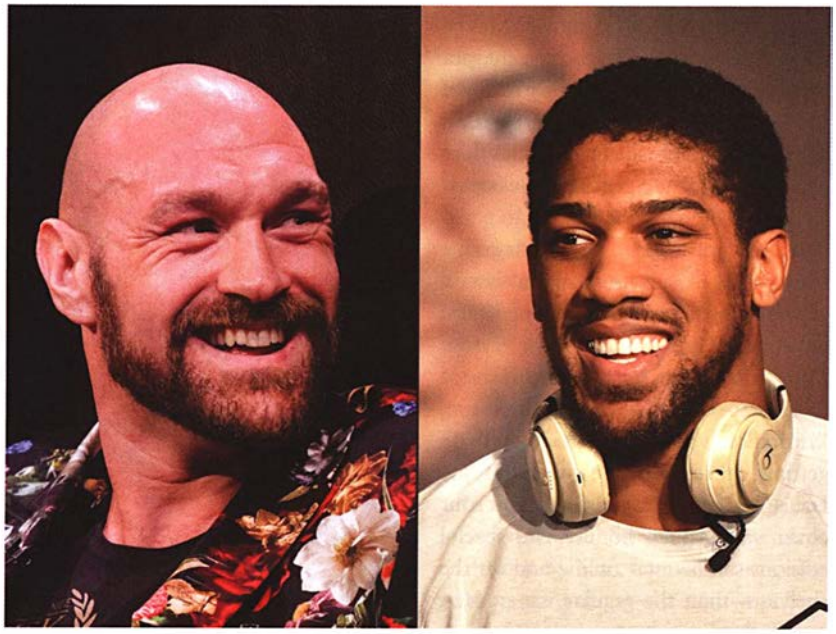
RINGSIDE BY DOUG FISCHER

HEAVYWEIGHT IMPLOSION
(OR SUMMER BUMMER, OR BUSINESS AS USUAL)



Fury-Joshua remains in the fantasy fight section as both move on to other business.

The timing seemed perfect. We wanted a contemporary cover subject that could match the popularity of our previous issues – back-to-back tributes to Marvelous Marvin Hagler and Sugar Ray Robinson – and keep the momentum going.

Tyson Fury vs. Anthony Joshua, the anticipated showdown for the undisputed heavyweight championship, fit the bill. Confirmation of the mega-match had been "looming," according to various sources, throughout the first half of May. The fighters hinted at "big announcements" coming soon via social media, and on May 16, Fury took to Twitter to announce that it was all set for August 14 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Good. We needed to put the magazine to bed by late May, so there was no time to waste with the cover design and Fury-Joshua story assignments. The production cycle would be a grind, as it often is, but it would be worth it because we'd have a magazine on newsstands and racks by late June, giving us more than a month of on-sale time, and we expected this one to sell well – especially in the U.K. – given the expected hype and marketing behind the build-up to the fight.

So, of course, a couple days later, Fury-Joshua was off. You already know the reason why. If you don't, you can read about the details in Gareth A Davies' World Beat column at the back of this magazine.

I can't say news of the fight dissolving came as a shock to me or the other editors. "Cautiously optimistic" is probably the best way to describe our mindset as we planned to produce a Fury vs. Joshua preview issue.

This ain't our first rodeo when it comes to abrupt cover story cancellations. It's happened twice since I've been Editor-In-Chief: First, with the original Cinco De Mayo date for the Canelo Alvarez-Gennadiy Golovkin rematch in 2018 and again with Joshua's June 2019 U.S. debut against Jarrell Miller. At least Fury-Joshua wasn't kiboshed by a positive

Jake Paul turns off hardcore boxing fans while switching on the mainstream.

PED test.

It was just typical boxing business bullshit. More than $150 million apparently isn't enough for the power brokers representing the heavyweights to work out a deal. Who knows? Maybe they're the smart ones. Maybe the pot will be twice as big for the showdown in December or the first quarter of 2022 if Fury can thrash Deontay Wilder again and if Joshua gets past Oleksandr Usyk this summer.

In the meantime, Ring Magazine readers can expect more special issues, such as our tributes to the Four Kings, the Gatti-Ward trilogy, Mike Tyson, Manny Pacquiao, the 50th anniversary of Frazier-Ali I, Hagler and Robinson. We don't have to worry about anything getting canceled or postponed if Joe Louis or Julio Cesar Chavez is our cover star. Added bonus: The special editions sell better – online and off the shelves – than the regular issues. Hey, we're a business, too!

But it's hard not to be concerned with the direction the boxing biz is going. Don't worry, I'm not going to spend the next 500 words taking a dump on the sport I love. The sport of boxing isn't what it used to be, but it's not on life support as some claim. I was ringside for the Juan Francisco Estrada-Roman Gonzalez rematch, which was as awesome as elite-level boxing gets. An undisputed junior welterweight champion was crowned on May 22 when Josh Taylor outpointed Jose Ramirez. Both men put forth the kind of efforts that make us proud to be hardcore fans. On July 17, an undisputed junior middleweight champion will emerge from the Jermell Charlo-Brian Castano clash.

There are enough significant fights happening to keep us diehards engaged, entertained and arguing on Twitter. But as excellent as these fighters and the fights they put on are, they don't create the major events that attract the fans, ratings, sponsors and revenue that invigorate an industry that desperately needs it.

Estrada-Gonzalez II barely garnered any attention beyond hardcore fandom. Taylor-Ramirez was fought in front of 1,000 spectators in Las Vegas, and despite Taylor being one of the best U.K. fighters on the planet, the fight was not picked up by a major British network, such as BT Sport (which is aligned with ESPN, the U.S. platform for the fight) or Sky Sports.

Charlo-Castano will air on Showtime, while Floyd Mayweather Jr. vs. YouTuber Logan Paul will be available on Showtime PPV (as well as Sky Sports Box Office, the PPV arm of the British platform). These network executives know which fights attract general interest and the revenue that comes with it.

Showtime recently signed Jake Paul, the younger and more accomplished of the Paul brothers (ugh – I can't believe I just wrote that), to an exclusive, multi-fight contract. What does that tell you?

Yep, boxing is desperate for stars.

Groan and moan all you want, but the Paul brothers have giant followings, and they understand fan service as few world-class boxers do. They know how to entertain, instigate and polarize an audience. And they wouldn't pass up a guaranteed $75 million payday, or even a fraction of that amount. There are elite-level boxers who would.

AL BELLO

The business of boxing is getting in the way of the sport, which isn't good business. The fights that are worthy of Ring covers, and 20-30 pages of preview articles – such as Fury-Joshua or Errol Spence vs. Terence Crawford – just don't happen enough to hold the interest of casual fans, who will go elsewhere for their combat sports entertainment, be it the UFC or WWE. The only time the general public has checked in on boxing during the pandemic months is when Mike Tyson and Roy Jones Jr. put on their exhibition and when Jake Paul blasted Ben Askren – both showcases were brought to us by Triller, a brand new media platform.

If Mayweather-Paul does Tyson-Jones numbers, we can expect to see more retired boxers vs. social media personalities, or perhaps retired mixed martial arts athletes, on more networks and platforms.

But don't worry, you're not going to see the Paul brothers on the cover of this magazine under my watch (although you can't blame us for addressing their phenomenon in an article). Some of you salty bastards STILL have your boxers in a bunch over Ronda Rousey being on the cover.

Fortunately, The Ring has the rich history of boxing and a 99-year-old archive to pull from when no cover-worthy fights are being made. Our special issues will explore history's greatest fighters and fights as we count down to our centennial celebration and beyond.

In other words, we'll keep doing our job even when the boxing industry fails to do its job. Don't fret, we're not going to stop chronicling the contemporary sport just because the biggest fights aren't being made. And luckily, there are still individual fighters of this era worthy of gracing the front of this magazine; chief among them is this month's substitute cover star, Canelo Alvarez, who doesn't need a dance partner to generate crossover interest.

Congratulations to the Mexican icon for reminding the world what a major boxing event looks like by attracting more than 70,000 fans to watch him hunt down Billy Joe Saunders at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas. Canelo's doing right by the business AND the sport by staying active and seeking to unify all the belts in the super middleweight division.

An even bigger congratulations must go to Showtime for the 20th anniversary of their hugely successful developmental series ShoBox: The New Generation, which The Ring is helping to celebrate with a 64-page commemorative special issue.

Ring subscribers received a complimentary edition of the ShoBox special packaged with this issue. If you're not a Ring subscriber, you can purchase the ShoBox special via the RingTV.com eShop. (What? I told you we're a business.)

FIGHTER OF THE MONTH

Taylor's path to glory has been awe-inspiring, and the Scotsman has had just 18 fights.

JOSH TAYLOR

It was going to take something very special to displace pound-for-pound No. 1 Canelo Alvarez as Fighter of the Month. Boxing's ultimate superstar was brilliant in his eight-round destruction of the previously unbeaten Billy Joe Saunders on May 8 at the AT&T Stadium in Dallas, where he collected yet another 168-pound title. Canelo now requires just one more belt – Caleb Plant's IBF strap – in order to fulfill his quest of becoming undisputed champion.

But just two weeks after Mexico's warrior hero added another top name to his resume, a proud Scotsman beat him to that rarified atmosphere of undisputed dominance. Junior welterweight phenom Josh Taylor successfully defended his Ring Magazine, IBF and WBA titles and picked up the WBC and WBO versions at the expense of the previously undefeated Jose Ramirez at Virgin Hotels Las Vegas. In a hard-fought battle, Taylor decked the habitually durable Mexican-American heavily in the sixth and seventh rounds and took a well-deserved unanimous decision. All three judges scored the bout 114-112.

It's been 50 years since the great Ken Buchanan reigned as undisputed lightweight champion and he was the last Scotsman to accomplish the feat. Taylor, who, like Buchanan, hails from the city of Edinburgh, has pulled it off in just 18 fights, whereas Buchanan made history in bout No. 40 (UD 15 Ruben Navarro). If that statistic isn't impressive enough, Taylor has also handed five unbeaten fighters in succession their first professional defeat, four of his last six opponents have resided inside the Top 5 of The Ring's 140-pound ratings and three of his foes entered as reigning titleholders. In the modern game, where politics and promotional squabbles frequently lead to the best avoiding the best, Taylor's run has been absolutely remarkable.

When one goes through the current Ring Magazine pound-for-pound list, you're hard-pressed to find many fighters who have enjoyed the success that Josh Taylor has had over the past two-and-a-half years. "The Tartan Tornado" became the first Scotsman to enter The Ring's mythical ratings since their inception in 1990, when he took the No. 9 position in November of last year. He now becomes the first Scotsman to enter the Top 5 courtesy of this history-making triumph.

Buchanan is proud.

DAVID BECKER

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NEW FACES: CHRISTIAN M'BILLI

By **Anson Wainwright**

AGE: 26
BORN: Yaounde, Cameroon
HOMETOWN: Montreal, Canada
WEIGHT CLASS: super middleweight
HEIGHT: 5-foot-8½ (174 cm)
AMATEUR RECORD: 70-15
TURNED PRO: 2017
PRO RECORD: 18-0 (17 knockouts)
TRAINER: Marc Ramsay
MANAGER: Camille Estephan
PROMOTER: Eye of the Tiger Management
TWITTER: @MbilliChristian

BEST NIGHT OF PRO CAREER AND WHY: M'Billi impressively stopped Jesus Antonio Gutierrez in five rounds on a Ring City USA card at the West Point Military Academy in New York on April 22.

"My last fight is the most satisfying fight of my career," M'Billi told The Ring through Francois Pratte, "because of the very good technical and physical progress."

Both fighters exchanged at close quarters until "Solide" broke through and beat his Mexican opponent into submission, dropping him twice in the fifth before the fight was waved off at 1:53 of the round.

WORST NIGHT OF PRO CAREER AND WHY: The recently turned 26-year-old is unhappy with his American debut in March 2019. It is his only fight so far that has gone the distance.

"My least satisfying fight is my fight in Philadelphia against Humberto Gutierrez Ochoa," M'Billi said. "Despite the victory, it was not the kind of show I wanted to offer with a last-minute opponent."

WHY HE'S A PROSPECT: M'Billi was a standout amateur, winning gold medals at the European Youth and European Union Championships. He also represented France at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

"Despite losing in the quarterfinals (to eventual gold medalist Arlen Lopez), just next to a medal [round], the experience at the Olympics was rewarding for me," he said.

In the unpaid ranks, he bested Zhanibek Alimkhanuly, who is now ranked No. 9 by The Ring at 160 pounds. He also beat up-and-coming junior middleweight prospect Anthony Fowler three times and scored a pair of wins over longtime amateur stalwart Zoltan Harcsa.

The aggressive boxer-puncher has gained valuable experience training alongside IBF and WBC light heavyweight titleholder Artur Beterbiev, former WBO 175-pound beltholder Eleider Alvarez and former IBF middleweight titlist David Lemieux in Canada.

M'Billi says he has several key attributes that will serve him well: "My determination, my fighting spirit, my exceptional mental, physical and cardiovascular capacities."

WBO junior lightweight titleholder Jamel Herring, who served as a commentator for Ring City USA, watched M'Billi and liked what he saw.

"I liked his pacing. He brings a lot of pressure, but he is calculated with his shots," said Herring. "He throws a lot of good combinations. You can tell he's physically strong. [Gutierrez] looked bigger than him, but [M'Billi] physically moved him around to where he wanted him to. He has a great gas tank; he can go the distance if he has to.

"At first glance, he looks like an ordinary muscular dude. But when he gets going, he shows he has a lot of determination and he wants to make a huge impact in the sport. I saw the confidence in him during the post-fight interview; he really wants to fight everybody out there, and you've got to love that. "

WHY HE'S A SUSPECT: While Herring liked the all-action approach, he feels M'Billi needs to be less predictable when he faces the top fighters at 168 pounds.

"With that great pacing he has, he also needs to learn how to change his speed and rhythm to throw your opponent off," explained Herring. "If you really looked at it, he was fighting at the same speed. If you have a guy like Canelo [Alvarez], he has a smart trainer like Eddy Reynoso; they'll learn how to pick up your timing.

"He doesn't have to throw everything so hard. Smart fighters set shots up: They might throw a little jab out there, and then they'll change it up into a big shot and change the speed. Everything he threw basically had knockout written on it, which is entertaining, but when you're in there with a smart fighter, he's going to know how to time that. You can't knock everybody out. You might have to go the distance, and if that's the case, you don't want to blow your load too early."

Herring feels M'Billi is ready for the next step.

"Get him a regional title that will get him in the top 10," said Herring. "He's one of those guys who is high risk, low reward. In order to get into the mix for big fights, you've got to start climbing the rankings and forcing your way through the doors."

His team is on board. In fact, Camille Estephan of Eye of the Tiger Management has already made overtures to various fighters but was unable to secure their services.

"We contacted several elite super middleweights, including Steven Nelson, Vladimir Shishkin and Tureano Johnson – they all turned down the fight with M'Billi," said Estephan. "There are many circumstances as to why, but the bottom line is the fighters know facing M'Billi is no picnic.

"We have very high hopes that he's a world champion in the making. There is no doubt about it." RING

Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk and you can follow him on Twitter @AnsonWainwright.

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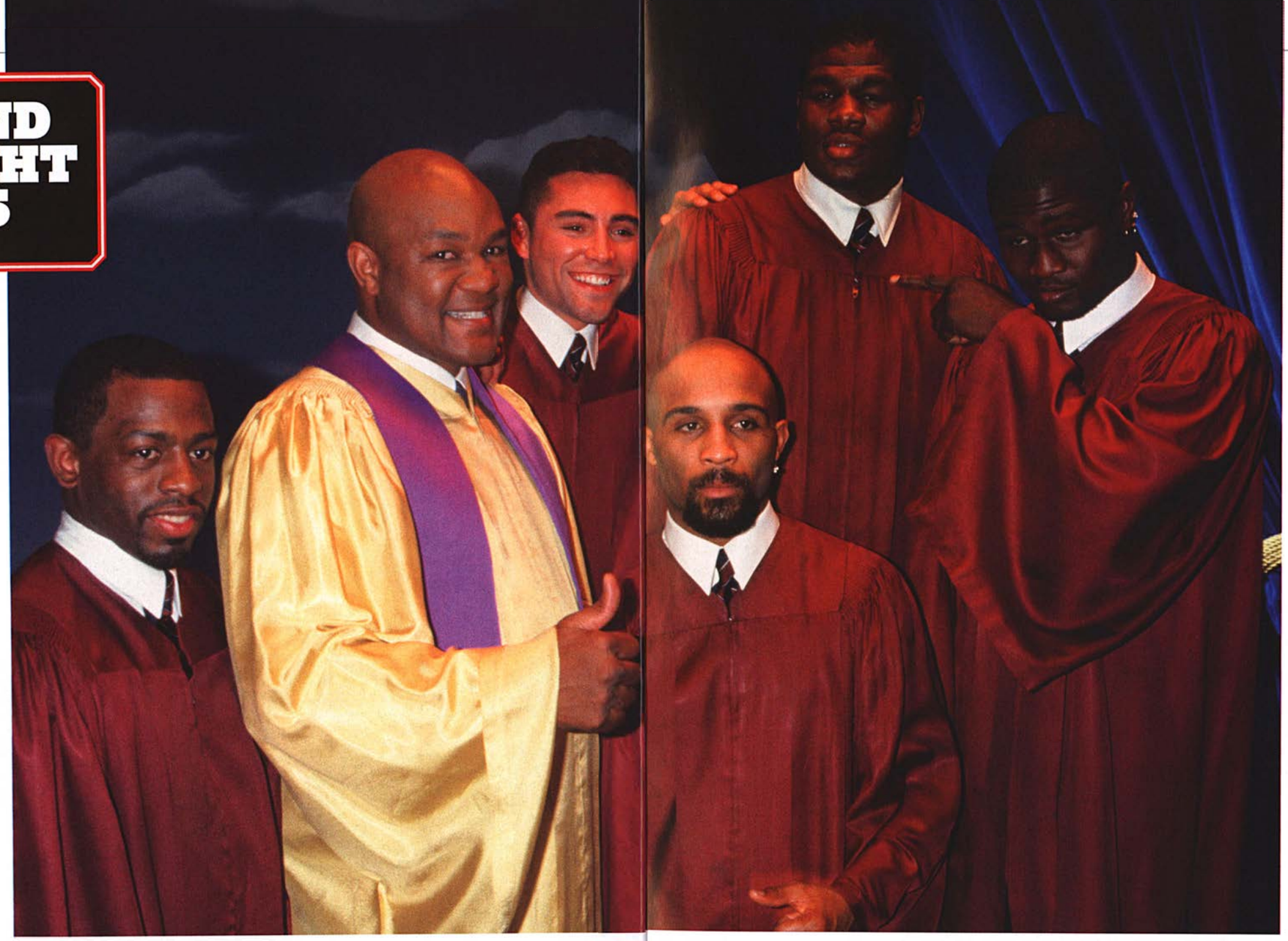
JABS AND STRAIGHT WRITES

BY THOMAS HAUSER

WHAT WOULD JESUS THINK ABOUT BOXING?



Foreman with (from left to right) Kevin Kelley, Oscar De La Hoya, Buddy McGirt, Riddick Bowe and James Toney.

The first thing that many fighters do after winning a fight is give praise to Jesus.

There's a great deal of combat in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. But Jesus was a man of peace. He preached, "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth," (Matthew 5:5) and taught, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, 'An eye for eye, and a tooth for tooth.' But I say unto you that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matthew 5:38-40)

This leads to a question I've been contemplating lately: "What would Jesus think about boxing?" There are more than a few people on the business end of the sport who one might analogize to the money changers and merchants who Jesus cast out of the temple (John 2:13-16, Matthew 21:12-13). But I'm asking about the actual fight.

What would Jesus think about people participating in and paying to watch combat as a sport? Would he liken it to the horror of gladiators doing battle in the Roman Colosseum? Or would the fact that today's fighters participate of their own free will and rarely fight to the death lead to his being comfortable with boxing?

George Foreman and Evander Holyfield are born-again Christians whose devotion to their faith is well known. I asked each of them, "What would Jesus think about boxing?"

"I have been a Sunday school teacher now for about 42 years," George told me. "It's an ever-learning process. The stories told throughout the Old Testament included great wars and great battles where many lives were lost. 'Violence' appeared in these stories. But from the first story when Adam said, 'This is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh,' to Jesus saying 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,' the Bible has been a book of great stories of love and forgiveness. In the true scheme of things, boxing is no more than a game of 'marbles' that kids play till their knees give out on them."

Evander took a different approach, saying, "Our sport is competitive, not fight to the death. To compete in boxing takes focus and discipline, something Jesus would be proud of. A big difference."

Entire armies have gone to war in Jesus' name. But unlike war, boxing involves the imposition of physical damage and pain for the purpose of entertainment. Jesus lived in a different time with different standards for behavior than our own. But it's hard for me to imagine Jesus sitting at ringside, urging one fighter to inflict physical damage on another.

What would Jesus think about boxing? I'm not a Biblical scholar. I don't have an answer to the question. I'm just asking it.

★ ★ ★

When Jermain Taylor turned pro after the 2000 Olympics, trainer Pat Burns was charged with giving him the tools necessary to compete in the professional ranks and preparing him for battle.

Burns had served as a Marine in Vietnam. In 1968, in his words, "I got blown up pretty good. Shrapnel and gunfire. Spent a year in the hospital."

From 1972 through 1995, Burns was a detective and undercover officer with the Miami Police Department. After the 1980 riots, he was asked to start a Police Athletic League boxing program for inner-city youths. Soon, he was accompanying fighters to international matches. In 1992 and 1996, he was a coach for the United States Olympic boxing team.

Burns guided Taylor to two victories over Bernard Hopkins and the middleweight championship of the world. But the teacher-student relationship got off to an unusual start.

"When I first met Pat," Jermain later recalled, "I thought he was crazy."

Because?

"One day, I was tired and slacked off in the gym. There was this lizard on the ground, about six inches long. Pat picked it up and . . . Ugh!"

"Jermain was training for his first pro fight," Burns explained to this

writer, picking up the story. "He was showing some fatigue, and I wanted him to understand that he was expected to maintain a new level of intensity if he was going to be a professional fighter. So I told him, 'When a lizard gets in a fight, there's no quit in it.'"

Then Burns bit the head off the lizard.

Jermain's eyes grew wide.

Burns spit the lizard's head out of his mouth and held out the still-squirming body.

"Oh, my God," Jermain blurted out.

Burns came closer, waving the decapitated lizard.

Jermain took several steps back. "Oh, my God," he said again.

Then the man who five years later would dethrone Bernard Hopkins for the undisputed middleweight championship of the world turned and ran out of the gym. He returned several minutes later, but only to look in through the door.

"It's safe," someone told him. "The lizard is in the garbage."

The lesson had been learned. Professional boxing is a cold, hard, brutal world where only the strong survive. Right and wrong don't matter. Your opponent will do anything and everything to win. You will have to do the same. If you can't be like that in the ring, get out now.

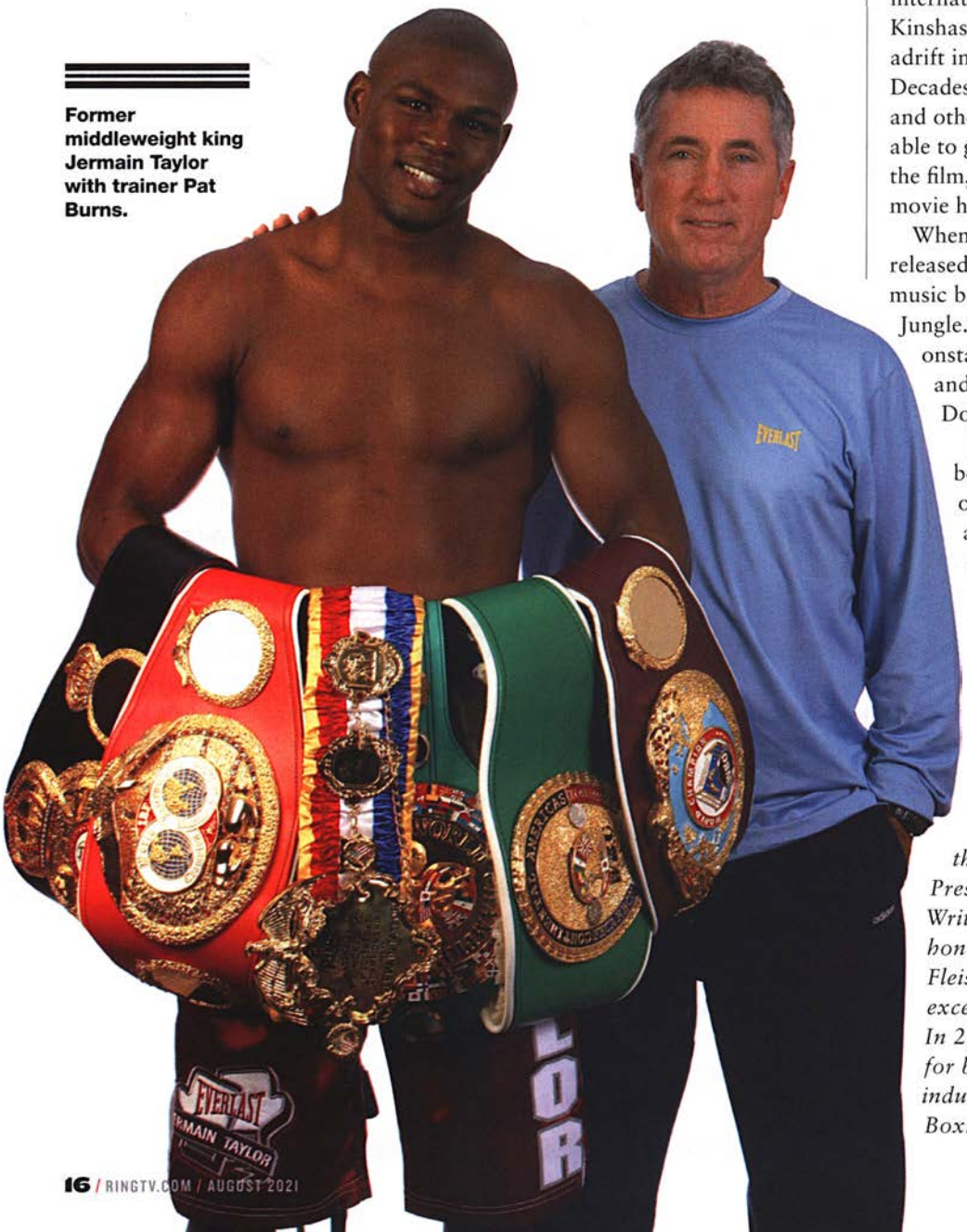
★ ★ ★

On March 8, 50 years to the day after the historic first fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier at Madison Square Garden, Leon Gast died.

Gast was in Zaire with a film crew when Muhammad Ali dethroned George Foreman in 1974. He returned to the United States having shot 300,000 feet of film, most of which revolved around an international music festival held in Kinshasa. But Leon was a guppy adrift in shark-infested waters. Decades of litigation with Don King and others followed before he was able to get physical possession of the film, clear rights, and make the movie he wanted to make.

When We Were Kings was released in 1996. It focused not on music but on the "Rumble in the Jungle." One year later, Leon stood onstage at the Academy Awards and accepted an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature.

Leon was passionate about boxing and as nice a man as one could meet. His death after a long illness at age 85 marks another loss from that remarkable time.



Former middleweight king Jermain Taylor with trainer Pat Burns.

Thomas Hauser's email address is thomashauserwriter@gmail.com. His most recent book – Staredown: Another Year Inside Boxing – was published by the University of Arkansas Press. In 2004, the Boxing Writers Association of America honored Hauser with the Nat Fleischer Award for career excellence in boxing journalism. In 2019, he was selected for boxing's highest honor - induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

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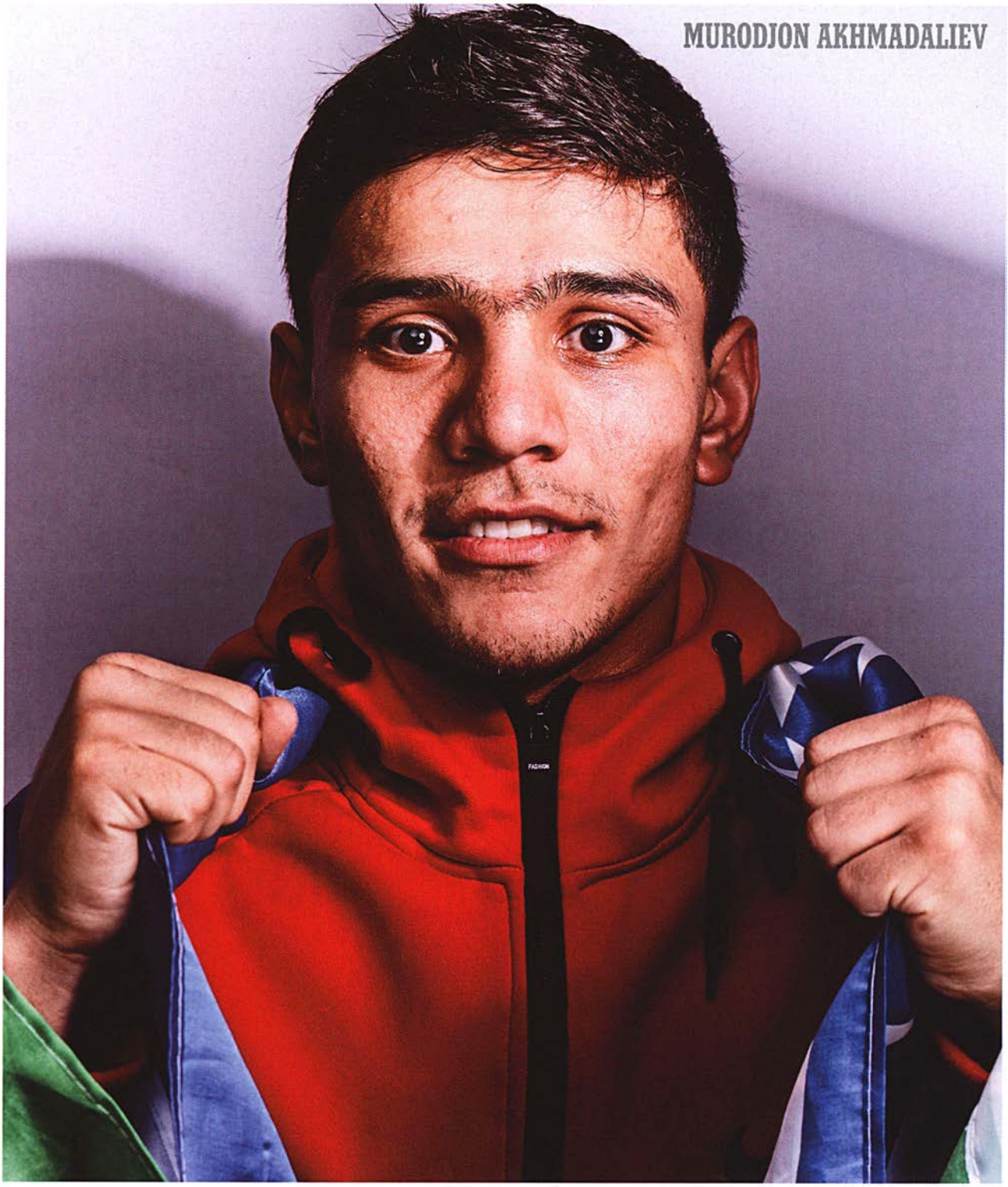


THE FACE OF BOXING

DIFFERENT PATHS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **WOJTEK URBANEK**
TEXT BY **THOMAS HAUSER**

On March 10, 2018, Evander Holyfield sat in the first row at Kings Theatre in Brooklyn for a eight-bout card promoted by Real Deal Boxing. Some of the fighters who entered the ring that night were prospects with a future in the sweet science. Others had no realistic

chance of becoming more than an opponent. The hot young prospects knew they were good. The question was how good. The opponents were living on dreams that would never come true. After each loss, they would tell themselves, "The next fight will be different. I can make adjustments." But almost always, the next fight would be like the one before.

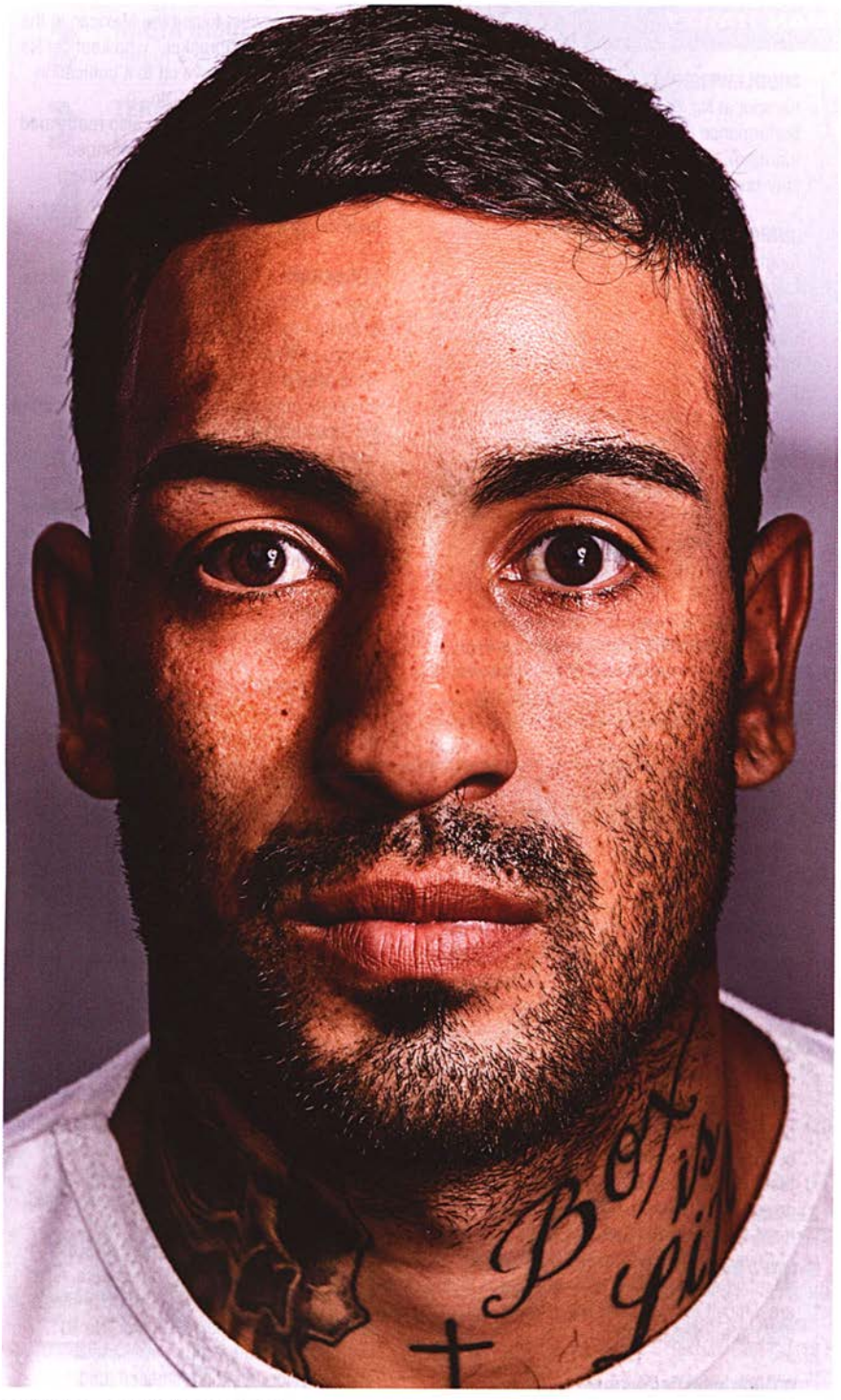
Two fighters on the card at Kings Theatre that night exemplified this divide. Murodjon Akhmadaliev of Uzbekistan was making his pro debut. He'd won a silver medal at the 2015 World Amateur Championships, losing to Michael Conlan in the finals. One year later, he was a bronze medalist at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics, losing to two-time gold medalist Robeisy Ramirez of Cuba in the semifinal round.

David Michel Paz, Akhmadaliev's opponent in Brooklyn, had a 4-4-1 record. Murodjon knocked him out at 1:08 of the first round.

After beating Paz, Akhmadaliev continued his winning ways. On January 30, 2020, he won a split decision over Daniel Roman to claim the WBA and IBF 122-pound world titles. On April 3 of this year, he retained his belts and ran his record to 9-0 with a fifth-round stoppage of Ryosuke Iwasa.

Meanwhile, Paz has continued his downward slide, suffering knockout defeats in all three of his fights since losing to Akhmadaliev.

"Usually, I shoot my portraits of fighters at press conferences, weigh-ins or an event like the BWAA dinner," Wojtek Urbanek notes. "This time, it was different. I was set up backstage at Kings Theatre and the fighters came to me before and after their fights. I couldn't see the fights from where I was. But the moment I saw each fighter afterward, I knew from his face whether he'd won or lost. It wasn't the blood or bruises. The winner of a fight can look worse than the loser. It was that one fighter would look happy and the other would look like his spirit had been crushed. These two photos were taken after. With the guy who lost, that's a very difficult moment for me. What do you say – 'I'm sorry you lost'? It's best to say nothing, do my job quickly and then thank him for giving me those moments."



DAVID MICHEL PAZ

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RATINGS

SUMMARY ★ ANALYSIS

The Ring Ratings through fights of May 22, 2021

RECENT FIGHT RESULTS AND CHANGES IN THE RING'S DIVISIONAL RANKINGS BY BRIAN HARTY

POUND FOR POUND: Nobody on the Ratings Panel thought Josh Taylor should remain at No. 9 after his victory over Jose Ramirez, but the question was whether he was a Top 5 pound-for-pounder or merely the sixth or seventh-best fighter in the world.

As Managing Editor Tom Gray put it: "Taylor is one of only two undisputed champions on the pound-for-pound list (I regard Teofimo as undisputed despite the WBC franchise distinction). The combined record of his last six opponents is 136-1. Three of those fighters were reigning world champions, one of them was a former world champion, and all four were stationed comfortably inside the Top 5 of The Ring's 140-pound ratings. Those statistics are insane for a modern-day fighter."

No. 5 it is.

HEAVYWEIGHT: Joseph Parker (No. 5 last month) overcame an early knockdown to win a decision over Derek Chisora (unrated) in England on May 1, and Andy Ruiz Jr. (No. 6) did the same against Chris Arreola on the same night in California. Both of those victories were deemed more meaningful than what Luis Ortiz (No. 4) has done lately, so the Cuban was dropped to No. 6 while Parker and Ruiz each gained a notch.

CRUISERWEIGHT: Michal Cieslak remained at No. 10 after staggering Russian Yury Kashinsky (unrated) with a clean right counter in the first round, though some thought the resulting stoppage was premature.

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT: In his first fight since an upset loss to Jean Pascal in August 2019, Marcus Browne pitched a shutout against Denis Grachev (unrated) to hold his position at No. 8. The winning scores were closer but still unanimous for No. 2-rated Dmitry Bivol, who also saw his first action since 2019 and left a fine layer of rust in the ring after a title defense against Craig Richards (unrated).

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHT: Canelo Alvarez got to see a bit of the Billy Joe Saunders who had frustrated his previous 30 opponents with slippery potshots, but there was no hurry as the Mexican champion calibrated his hammer for the drop in Round 8. The WBO title changed hands and the bones were broken, but Saunders didn't really perform below his usual level, so he stayed put at No. 4.

MIDDLEWEIGHT: Chris Eubank Jr. held onto his spot at No. 6 with an uneven but successful performance against Marcus Morrison (unrated), outpointing his countryman in a stay-busy 10-rounder.

JUNIOR MIDDLEWEIGHT: Erislandy Lara fought at middleweight against Thomas Lamanna and flattened "Cornflake" with a single left to the temple in Round 1, but even a blowout as un-Lara-like as that wasn't a clear indicator of his potential at 160. He says he'll tailor his weight to future opportunities accordingly, so for the time being he remained the No. 2 at 154 pounds.

Sebastian Fundora justified his inclusion at No. 10 with a fourth-round stoppage of unrated Jorge Cota, which is great because every time he fights it gives us the opportunity to mention that the dude is almost five inches taller than a prime Thomas Hearns.

JUNIOR WELTERWEIGHT: Taylor's career trajectory is a one-way ticket to the exosphere after his victory over Ramirez, but there's nowhere for the division champ to go on the ratings list. Ramirez, meanwhile, was demoted from No. 1 to No. 2.

FEATHERWEIGHT: Emanuel Navarrete (No. 6 last month) made the first defense of his WBO belt with a challenging but super-stylish win over Christopher Diaz (unrated), weaving together uppercut-starring combos that reaped a quartet of knockdowns before referee Samuel Burgos pulled the plug with 11 seconds remaining in the fight. A promotion was inevitable, but the Ratings Panel stalled a bit on comparing Navarrete's accomplishments to those of Xu Can (No. 2 at the time), and the debate veered into philosophy as members pondered the role of a fighter's "upside" in assigning ranks. The dominant opinion was that the order should be based almost entirely on real-world results rather than theoretical head-to-head matchups. Still, the recent wins of Navarrete (Ruben Villa and Diaz) and Xu (Manny Robles III, Shun Kubo and Jesus Rojas) are difficult to weigh. For now, the No. 2 spot went to the Mexican.

JUNIOR FEATHERWEIGHT: With a nickname based on being handsome, Brandon Figueroa will always be expected to risk facial damage as well as deliver it, and he did so in brawling with Luis Nery (unrated) for six rounds before a pinpoint liver shot folded the Mexican in the seventh. "The Heartbreaker," who kept his No. 4 ranking, will now move on to a unification bout with Stephen Fulton (No. 3).

No. 2-rated Daniel Roman also reaffirmed his toughness, weathering a prolonged assault from Ricardo Espinoza (unrated) before taking control and earning a unanimous decision victory.

FLYWEIGHT: The shocker of the month came courtesy of Sunny Edwards, the undefeated Brit who dropped down from his usual 115 pounds to challenge No. 1-rated Moruti Mthalane for his IBF title. Edwards fought brilliantly from start to finish, even bewildering the incumbent at times with his ability to dodge and counter; his lack of punching power was the only thing missing from a dominant performance. All three cards went in Edwards' favor (one a shutout) and one ratings panelist felt the win was good enough to go straight to No. 1. No. 2 was the consensus, which pushed No. 10-rated Joselito Velazquez off the list as Mthalane slipped to No. 5.

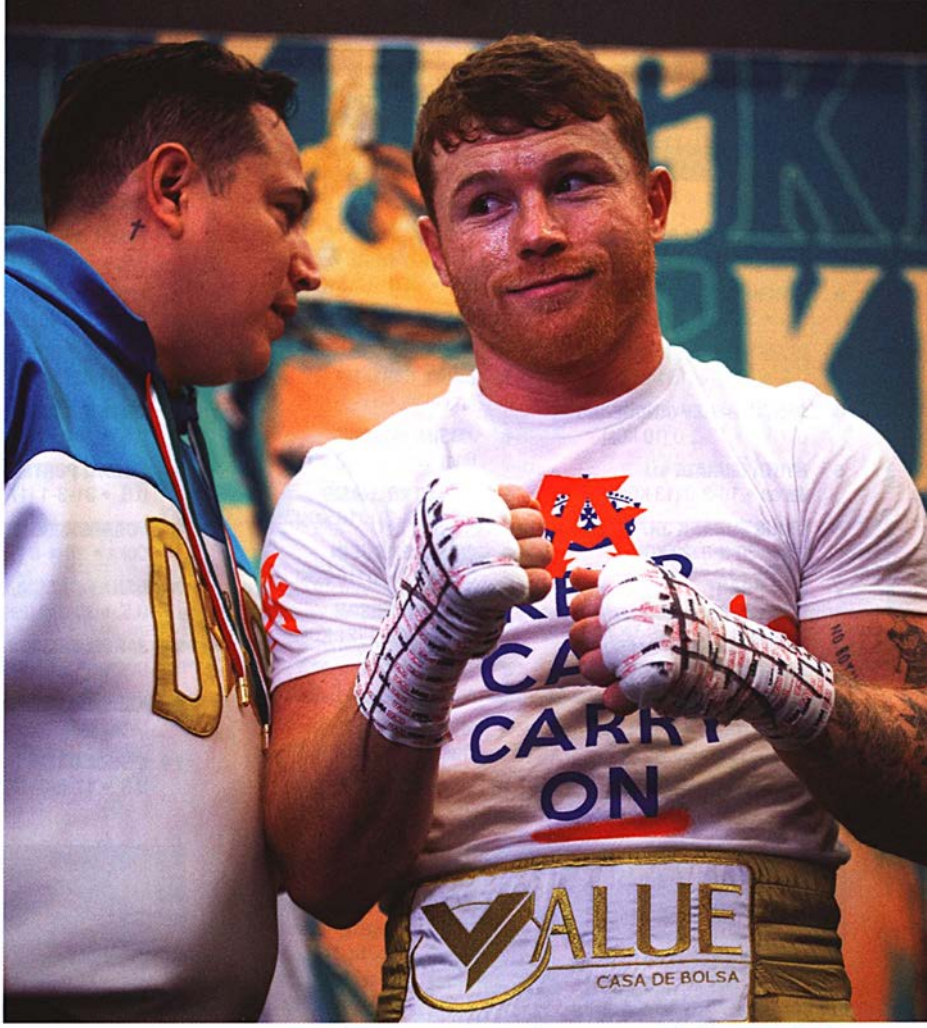
JUNIOR FLYWEIGHT: No. 1-rated Kenshiro Teraji defended his WBC title via unanimous decision in a rust-shaker against 10½-year veteran Tetsuya Hisada, who announced his retirement afterward. Hisada's departure from the No. 6 spot created a vacancy at No. 10 for undefeated South African Sivenathi Nontshinga.

Elwin Soto then rose from No. 5 to No. 3 after nine hard rounds with former strawweight titleholder Katsunari Takayama. Takayama was outpunching Soto on paper but clearly absorbing more damage, so the stoppage result wasn't a surprise, but the Japanese veteran was disappointed when referee Laurence Cole stepped in. The massive crowd that was there to see Alvarez vs. Saunders seemed to feel his pain, and it was unfortunate for a classy warrior who wanted to go out on his own terms. It would be even more unfortunate if any controversy has obscured the fact that Soto fought a great fight.

And on May 22, boxing finally saw the return of one of its favorite characters. After almost two-and-a-half years of frustrations and cancellations, Hekkie Budler (No. 4) got back into action with a unanimous decision over Jonathan Almacen (unrated). Things almost seem normal again with The Hexecutioner around.

P4P

1. **CANELO ALVAREZ**
   Mexico • 56-1-2 (38 KOs)
2. **NAOYA INOUE**
   Japan • 20-0-0 (17 KOs)
3. **TERENCE CRAWFORD**
   U.S. • 37-0-0 (28 KOs)
4. **OLEKSANDR USYK**
   Ukraine • 18-0-0 (13 KOs)
5. **JOSH TAYLOR**
   U.K. • 18-0-0 (13 KOs)
6. **ERROL SPENCE JR.**
   U.S. • 27-0-0 (21 KOs)
7. **TEOFIMO LOPEZ**
   U.S. • 16-0-0 (12 KOs)
8. **JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA**
   Mexico • 42-3-0 (28 KOs)
9. **VASILIY LOMACHENKO**
   Ukraine • 14-2-0 (10 KOs)
10. **KAZUTO IOKA**
    Japan • 26-2-0 (15 KOs)



The best pound-for-pound fighter in the world has been very busy. In his third outing in six months, the Mexican icon handed former super middleweight titleholder Billy Joe Saunders his first pro defeat.

HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT UNLIMITED

- C **TYSON FURY** RING, WBC
  U.K. • 30-0-1 (21 KOs)
- 1 **ANTHONY JOSHUA** IBF, WBA, WBO
  U.K. • 24-1-0 (22 KOs)
- 2 **DEONTAY WILDER**
  U.S. • 42-1-1 (41 KOs)
- 3 **DILLIAN WHYTE**
  U.K. • 28-2-0 (19 KOs)
- 4 **JOSEPH PARKER**
  New Zealand • 29-2-0 (21 KOs)
- 5 **ANDY RUIZ JR.**
  U.S. • 34-2-0 (22 KOs)
- 6 **LUIS ORTIZ**
  Cuba • 32-2-0 (27 KOs)
- 7 **MICHAEL HUNTER**
  U.S. • 19-1-1 (13 KOs)
- 8 **ALEXANDER POVETKIN**
  Russia • 36-3-1 (25 KOs)
- 9 **OSCAR RIVAS**
  Colombia • 27-1-0 (19 KOs)
- 10 **OLEKSANDR USYK**
  Ukraine • 18-0-0 (13 KOs)

CRUISERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 200 POUNDS

- C **MAIRIS BRIEDIS** RING, IBF
  Latvia • 27-1-0 (19 KOs)
- 1 **YUNIEL DORTICOS**
  Cuba • 24-2-0 (22 KOs)
- 2 **ILUNGA MAKABU** WBC
  Congo • 28-2-0 (25 KOs)
- 3 **LAWRENCE OKOLIE** WBO
  U.K. • 16-0-0 (13 KOs)
- 4 **THABISO MCHUNU**
  S. Africa • 23-5-0 (13 KOs)
- 5 **KEVIN LERENA**
  S. Africa • 26-1-0 (13 KOs)
- 6 **ANDREW TABITI**
  U.S. • 17-1-0 (13 KOs)
- 7 **ARSEN GOULAMIRIAN** WBA
  France • 26-0-0 (18 KOs)
- 8 **KRZYSZTOF GLOWACKI**
  Poland • 31-3-0 (19 KOs)
- 9 **ALEKSEI PAPIN**
  Russia • 13-1-0 (12 KOs)
- 10 **MICHAL CIESLAK**
  Poland • 21-1-0 (15 KOs)

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 175 POUNDS

- C **(VACANT)**
- 1 **ARTUR BETERBIEV** IBF, WBC
  Russia • 16-0-0 (16 KOs)
- 2 **DMITRY BIVOL** WBA
  Russia • 18-0-0 (11 KOs)
- 3 **JOE SMITH JR.**
  U.S. • 26-3-0 (21 KOs)
- 4 **SERGEY KOVALEV**
  Russia • 34-4-1 (29 KOs)
- 5 **JEAN PASCAL**
  Canada • 35-6-1 (20 KOs)
- 6 **BADOU JACK**
  Sweden • 23-3-3 (13 KOs)
- 7 **ELEIDER ALVAREZ**
  Colombia • 25-2-0 (13 KOs)
- 8 **MARCUS BROWNE**
  U.S. • 24-1-0 (16 KOs)
- 9 **UMAR SALAMOV**
  Russia • 26-1-0 (19 KOs)
- 10 **MAXIM VLASOV**
  Russia • 45-4-0 (26 KOs)

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS

- C **CANELO ALVAREZ** RING, WBA, WBC, WBO
  Mexico • 56-1-2 (38 KOs)
- 1 **DAVID BENAVIDEZ**
  U.S. • 24-0-0 (21 KOs)
- 2 **CALEB PLANT** IBF
  U.S. • 21-0-0 (12 KOs)
- 3 **CALLUM SMITH**
  U.K. • 27-1-0 (19 KOs)
- 4 **BILLY JOE SAUNDERS**
  U.K. • 30-1-0 (14 KOs)
- 5 **ANTHONY DIRRELL**
  U.S. • 33-2-2 (24 KOs)
- 6 **JOHN RYDER**
  U.K. • 29-5-0 (16 KOs)
- 7 **DAVID LEMIEUX**
  Canada • 42-4-0 (35 KOs)
- 8 **DANIEL JACOBS**
  U.S. • 37-3-0 (30 KOs)
- 9 **FEDOR CHUDINOV**
  Russia • 23-2-1 (16 KOs)
- 10 **CARLOS GONGORA**
  Ecuador • 20-0-0 (15 KOs)

RATINGS

Through fights of May 22, 2021

MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS

- **C** (VACANT)
- **1** **GENNADIY GOLOVKIN** IBF
  Kazakhstan • 41-1-1 (36 KOs)
- **2** **JERMALL CHARLO** WBC
  U.S. • 31-0-0 (22 KOs)
- **3** **DEMETRIUS ANDRADE** WBO
  U.S. • 30-0-0 (18 KOs)
- **4** **SERGIY DEREVYANCHENKO**
  Ukraine • 13-3-0 (10 KOs)
- **5** **RYOTA MURATA** WBA
  Japan • 16-2-0 (13 KOs)
- **6** **CHRIS EUBANK JR.**
  U.K. • 30-2-0 (22 KOs)
- **7** **ROB BRANT**
  U.S. • 26-2-0 (18 KOs)
- **8** **JAIME MUNGUIA**
  Mexico • 36-0-0 (29 KOs)
- **9** **ZHANIBEK ALIMKHANULY**
  Kazakhstan • 9-0-0 (5 KOs)
- **10** **LIAM WILLIAMS**
  U.K. • 23-3-1 (18 KOs)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS

- **C** **JERMELL CHARLO** RING, WBC, IBF, WBA
  U.S. • 34-1-0 (18 KOs)
- **1** **JARRETT HURD**
  U.S. • 24-1-0 (16 KOs)
- **2** **ERISLANDY LARA**
  Cuba • 28-3-3 (16 KOs)
- **3** **BRIAN CASTANO** WBO
  Argentina • 17-0-1 (12 KOs)
- **4** **JEISON ROSARIO**
  Dom. Rep. • 20-2-1 (14 KOs)
- **5** **JULIAN WILLIAMS**
  U.S. • 27-2-1 (16 KOs)
- **6** **ERICKSON LUBIN**
  U.S. • 23-1-0 (16 KOs)
- **7** **TONY HARRISON**
  U.S. • 28-3-1 (21 KOs)
- **8** **TIM TSZYU**
  Australia • 18-0-0 (14 KOs)
- **9** **MICHEL SORO**
  France • 35-2-1 (24 KOs)
- **10** **SEBASTIAN FUNDORA**
  U.S. • 17-0-1 (12 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS

- **C** (VACANT)
- **1** **ERROL SPENCE JR.** IBF, WBC
  U.S. • 27-0-0 (21 KOs)
- **2** **TERENCE CRAWFORD** WBO
  U.S. • 37-0-0 (28 KOs)
- **3** **MANNY PACQUIAO**
  Phil. • 62-7-2 (39 KOs)
- **4** **KEITH THURMAN**
  U.S. • 29-1-0 (22 KOs)
- **5** **SHAWN PORTER**
  U.S. • 31-3-1 (17 KOs)
- **6** **YORDENIS UGAS** WBA
  Cuba • 26-4-0 (12 KOs)
- **7** **DANNY GARCIA**
  U.S. • 36-3-0 (21 KOs)
- **8** **JARON ENNIS**
  U.S. • 27-0-0 (25 KOs)
- **9** **KUDRATILLO ABDUKAKHOROV**
  Uzbekistan • 18-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **10** **VERGIL ORTIZ JR.**
  U.S. • 17-0-0 (17 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS

- **C** **JOSH TAYLOR** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
  U.K. • 18-0-0 (13 KOs)
- **1** **REGIS PROGRAIS**
  U.S. • 26-1-0 (21 KOs)
- **2** **JOSE RAMIREZ**
  U.S. • 26-1-0 (17 KOs)
- **3** **JOSE ZEPEDA**
  U.S. • 34-2-0 (26 KOs)
- **4** **VIKTOR POSTOL**
  Ukraine • 31-3-0 (12 KOs)
- **5** **ARNOLD BARBOZA**
  U.S. • 25-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **6** **IVAN BARANCHYK**
  Russia • 20-2-0 (13 KOs)
- **7** **MARIO BARRIOS**
  U.S. • 26-0-0 (17 KOs)
- **8** **BATYRZHAN JUKEMBAYEV**
  Kazakhstan • 18-0-0 (14 KOs)
- **9** **SHOHJAHON ERGASHEV**
  Uzbekistan • 19-0-0 (17 KOs)
- **10** **ROBERT EASTER JR.**
  U.S. • 23-1-1 (14 KOs)

Heavyweight Joseph Parker (right) moved up to No. 4 courtesy of a 12-round unanimous decision win over British warrior Derek Chisora.

Andy Ruiz (right) retained his No. 5 position at heavyweight by overcoming a shaky start to outpoint Chris Arreola.

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS

- **C** **TEOFIMO LOPEZ** RING, WBA, WBO, IBF
  U.S. • 16-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **1** **VASILIY LOMACHENKO**
  Ukraine • 14-2-0 (10 KOs)
- **2** **RYAN GARCIA**
  U.S. • 21-0-0 (18 KOs)
- **3** **DEVIN HANEY** WBC
  U.S. • 25-0-0 (15 KOs)
- **4** **RICHARD COMMEY**
  Ghana • 30-3-0 (27 KOs)
- **5** **LUKE CAMPBELL**
  U.K. • 20-4-0 (16 KOs)
- **6** **JAVIER FORTUNA**
  Dom. Rep. • 36-2-1 (25 KOs)
- **7** **JORGE LINARES**
  Venezuela • 47-5-0 (29 KOs)
- **8** **GEORGE KAMBOSOS JR.**
  Australia • 19-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **9** **MASAYOSHI NAKATANI**
  Japan • 19-1-0 (13 KOs)
- **10** **ISAAC CRUZ**
  Mexico • 21-1-1 (15 KOs)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS

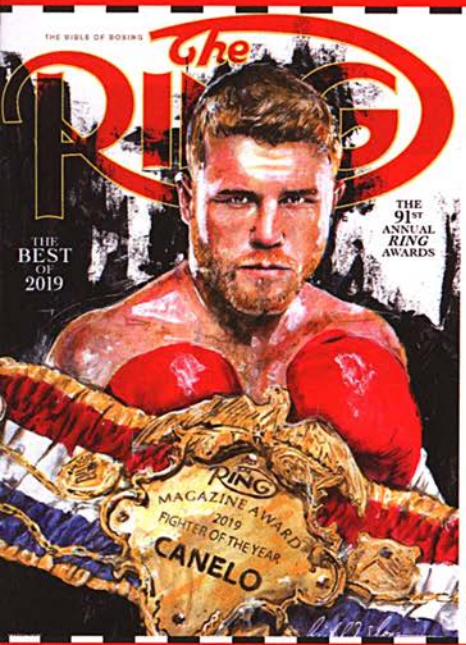
- **C** (VACANT)
- **1** **GERVONTA DAVIS** WBA
  U.S. • 24-0-0 (23 KOs)
- **2** **OSCAR VALDEZ** WBC
  Mexico • 29-0-0 (23 KOs)
- **3** **JAMEL HERRING** WBO
  U.S. • 23-2-0 (11 KOs)
- **4** **JOSEPH DIAZ JR.** IBF
  U.S. • 31-1-1 (15 KOs)
- **5** **MIGUEL BERCHELT**
  Mexico • 37-2-0 (33 KOs)
- **6** **TEVIN FARMER**
  U.S. • 30-5-1 (6 KOs)
- **7** **SHAVKATDZHON RAKHIMOV**
  Russia • 15-0-1 (12 KOs)
- **8** **SHAKUR STEVENSON**
  U.S. • 15-0-0 (8 KOs)
- **9** **CHRIS COLBERT**
  U.S. • 15-0-0 (6 KOs)
- **10** **ROGER GUTIERREZ**
  Venezuela • 25-3-1 (20 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS

- **C** (VACANT)
- **1** **GARY RUSSELL JR.** WBC
  U.S. • 31-1-0 (18 KOs)
- **2** **EMANUEL NAVARRETE** WBO
  Mexico • 33-1-0 (28 KOs)
- **3** **XU CAN**
  China • 18-2-0 (3 KOs)
- **4** **KID GALAHAD**
  U.K. • 27-1-0 (16 KOs)
- **5** **MAURICIO LARA**
  Mexico • 22-2-0 (15 KOs)
- **6** **JOSH WARRINGTON**
  U.K. • 30-1-0 (7 KOs)
- **7** **MARK MAGSAYO**
  Phil. • 22-0-0 (15 KOs)
- **8** **TUGSTSOGT NYAMBAYAR**
  Mongolia • 12-1-0 (9 KOs)
- **9** **JESSIE MAGDALENO**
  U.S. • 28-1-0 (18 KOs)
- **10** **JOET GONZALEZ**
  U.S. • 24-1-0 (14 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS

- **C** (VACANT)
- **1** **MURODJON AKHMADALIEV** IBF, WBA
  Uzbekistan • 9-0-0 (7 KOs)
- **2** **DANIEL ROMAN**
  U.S. • 29-3-1 (10 KOs)
- **3** **STEPHEN FULTON** WBO
  U.S. • 19-0-0 (8 KOs)
- **4** **BRANDON FIGUEROA** WBC
  U.S. • 22-0-1 (17 KOs)
- **5** **ANGELO LEO**
  U.S. • 20-1-0 (9 KOs)
- **6** **HIROAKI TESHIGAWARA**
  Japan • 22-2-2 (15 KOs)
- **7** **RAEESE ALEEM**
  U.S. • 18-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **8** **AZAT HOVHANNISYAN**
  Armenia • 19-3-0 (16 KOs)
- **9** **RONNY RIOS**
  U.S. • 33-3-0 (16 KOs)
- **10** **RYOSUKE IWASA**
  Japan • 27-4-0 (17 KOs)



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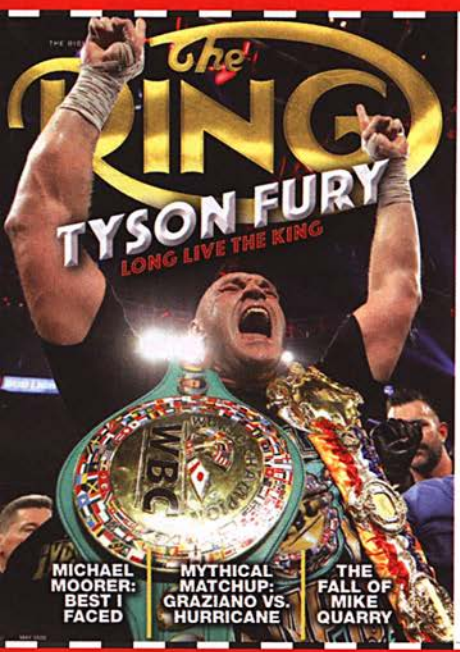

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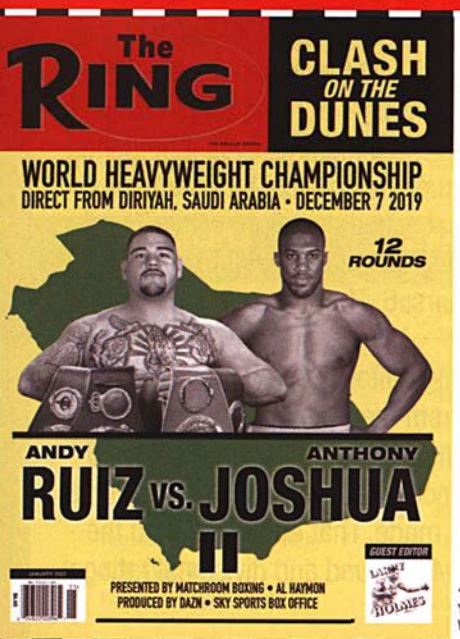

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RATINGS

Through fights of May 22, 2021

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS

- **C** **NAOYA INOUE** RING, IBF, WBA
  Japan • 20-0-0 (17 KOs)
- **1** **NONITO DONAIRE**
  Phil. • 40-6-0 (26 KOs)
- **2** **NORDINE OUBAALI** WBC
  France • 17-0-0 (12 KOs)
- **3** **JOHN RIEL CASIMERO** WBO
  Philippines • 30-4-0 (21 KOs)
- **4** **EMMANUEL RODRIGUEZ**
  Puerto Rico • 19-2-0 (12 KOs)
- **5** **ZOLANI TETE**
  S. Africa • 28-4-0 (21 KOs)
- **6** **TAKUMA INOUE**
  Japan • 14-1-0 (3 KOs)
- **7** **JASON MOLONEY**
  Australia • 21-2-0 (18 KOs)
- **8** **GUILLERMO RIGONDEAUX**
  Cuba • 20-1-0 (13 KOs)
- **9** **MIKE PLANIA**
  Philippines • 25-1-0 (12 KOs)
- **10** **GARY ANTONIO RUSSELL**
  U.S. • 18-0-0 (12 KOs)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS

- **C** **JUAN FRANCISCO ESTRADA** RING, WBA, WBC
  Mexico • 42-3-0 (28 KOs)
- **1** **SRISAKET SOR RUNGVISAI**
  Thailand • 50-5-1 (43 KOs)
- **2** **ROMAN GONZALEZ**
  Nicaragua • 50-3-0 (41 KOs)
- **3** **KAZUTO IOKA** WBO
  Japan • 26-2-0 (15 KOs)
- **4** **JERWIN ANCAJAS** IBF
  Phil. • 33-1-2 (22 KOs)
- **5** **KHALID YAFAI**
  U.K. • 26-1-0 (15 KOs)
- **6** **JOSHUA FRANCO**
  U.S. • 17-1-2 (8 KOs)
- **7** **FRANCISCO RODRIGUEZ JR.**
  Mexico • 34-4-1 (24 KOs)
- **8** **ANDREW MOLONEY**
  Australia • 21-1-0 (14 KOs)
- **9** **JEYVIER CINTRON**
  Puerto Rico • 11-1-0 (5 KOs)
- **10** **CARLOS CUADRAS**
  Mexico • 39-4-1 (27 KOs)

FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **JULIO CESAR MARTINEZ** WBC
  Mexico • 17-1-0 (13 KOs)
- **2** **SUNNY EDWARDS** IBF
  U.K. • 16-0-0 (4 KOs)
- **3** **ARTEM DALAKIAN** WBA
  Ukraine • 20-0-0 (14 KOs)
- **4** **JUNTO NAKATANI** WBO
  Japan • 21-0-0 (16 KOs)
- **5** **MORUTI MTHALANE**
  S. Africa • 39-3-0 (26 KOs)
- **6** **MASAYUKI KURODA**
  Japan • 30-8-3 (16 KOs)
- **7** **CRISTOFER ROSALES**
  Nicaragua • 31-5-0 (21 KOs)
- **8** **JAY HARRIS**
  U.K. • 18-1-0 (9 KOs)
- **9** **ANGEL ACOSTA**
  Puerto Rico • 22-2-0 (21 KOs)
- **10** **MCWILLIAMS ARROYO**
  Puerto Rico • 21-4-0 (16 KOs)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS

- **C** **HIROTO KYOGUCHI** RING, WBA
  Japan • 15-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **1** **KENSHIRO TERAJI** WBC
  Japan • 18-0-0 (10 KOs)
- **2** **FELIX ALVARADO** IBF
  Nicaragua • 36-2-0 (31 KOs)
- **3** **ELWIN SOTO** WBO
  Mexico • 19-1-0 (13 KOs)
- **4** **HEKKIE BUDLER**
  S. Africa • 33-4-0 (10 KOs)
- **5** **CARLOS CANIZALES**
  Venezuela • 22-0-1 (17 KOs)
- **6** **EDWARD HENO**
  Phil. • 14-1-5 (5 KOs)
- **7** **SHO KIMURA**
  Japan • 19-3-2 (12 KOs)
- **8** **AGUSTIN GAUTO**
  Argentina • 16-0-0 (11 KOs)
- **9** **JESSE RODRIGUEZ**
  U.S. • 13-0-0 (9 KOs)
- **10** **SIVENATHI NONTSHINGA**
  S. Africa • 10-0-0 (9 KOs)

Dmitry Bivol (right) retained his No. 2 spot at 175 pounds by posting a routine points win over Craig Richards.

Chris Eubank Jr. held onto his No. 6 spot at 160 pounds with a points win over countryman Marcus Morrison.

STRAWWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS

- **C** **(VACANT)**
- **1** **KNOCKOUT CP FRESHMART** WBA
  Thailand • 21-0-0 (7 KOs)
- **2** **PETCHMANEE CP FRESHMART** WBC
  Thailand • 36-1-0 (23 KOs)
- **3** **WANHENG MENAYOTHIN**
  Thailand • 54-1-0 (18 KOs)
- **4** **WILFREDO MENDEZ** WBO
  Puerto Rico • 16-1-0 (6 KOs)
- **5** **BYRON ROJAS**
  Nicaragua • 27-4-3 (11 KOs)
- **6** **VIC SALUDAR**
  Phil. • 21-4-0 (11 KOs)
- **7** **JOSE ARGUMEDO**
  Mexico • 24-4-1 (15 KOs)
- **8** **SIMPIWE KONKCO**
  S. Africa • 19-6-0 (7 KOs)
- **9** **RENE MARK CUARTO** IBF
  Phil. • 19-2-2 (11 KOs)
- **10** **PEDRO TADURAN**
  Phil. • 14-3-1 (11 KOs)

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RECORDS PROVIDED BY BOXREC.COM

Championship vacancies can be filled in the following two ways: 1. The Ring's Nos. 1 and 2 contenders fight one another. 2. If the Nos. 1 and 2 contenders choose not to fight one another and No. 1 fights No. 3, that matchup could be for the Ring title if the Editorial Board deems No. 3 worthy.

A champion can lose his belt in six situations: 1. The Champion loses a fight in the weight class in which he is champion; 2. The Champion moves to another weight class; 3. The Champion does not schedule a fight in any weight class for 18 months, although injuries and certain other unforeseen circumstances could be taken into consideration; 4. The Champion does not schedule a fight at his championship weight for 18 months (even if he fights at another weight); 5. The Champion does not schedule a fight with a Top-5 contender from any weight class for two years; 6. The Champion retires.

The Ring Editorial Board considers input from the Ratings Panel of boxing journalists from around the world and then decides collectively what changes will be made. That applies to both the pound-for-pound and divisional ratings.

WOMEN'S RATINGS

Through fights of May 22, 2021

POUND FOR POUND

1 **KATIE TAYLOR**
Ireland • 18-0-0 (6 KOs)

2 **CLARESSA SHIELDS**
U.S. • 11-0-0 (2 KOs)

3 **AMANDA SERRANO**
Puerto Rico • 40-1-1 (30 KOs)

4 **JESSICA MCCASKILL**
U.S. • 10-2-0 (3 KOs)

5 **DELFINE PERSOON**
Belgium • 44-3-0 (18 KOs)

6 **YESICA BOPP**
Argentina • 36-1-0 (16 KOs)

7 **CECILIA BRAEKHUS**
Norway • 36-2-0 (9 KOs)

8 **DANIELA BERMUDEZ**
Argentina • 29-4-3 (10 KOs)

9 **MARCELA ACUNA**
Argentina • 49-7-2 (20 KOs)

10 **MIKAELA MAYER**
U.S. • 14-0-0 (5 KOs)

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **ELIN CEDERROOS** IBF, WBA
Sweden • 8-0-0 (4 KOs)
2 **FRANCHON CREWS-DEZURN** WBC, WBO
U.S. • 7-1-0 (2 KOs)
3 **ALICIA NAPOLEON ESPINOSA**
U.S. • 12-2-0 (7 KOs)
4 **EMA KOZIN**
Slovenia • 21-0-1 (11 KOs)
5 **SAVANNAH MARSHALL**
U.K. • 10-0-0 (8 KOs)

MIDDLEWEIGHT
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS

C **CLARESSA SHIELDS** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
U.S. • 11-0-0 (2 KOs)
1 **SAVANNAH MARSHALL**
U.K. • 10-0-0 (8 KOs)
2 **CHRISTINA HAMMER**
Germany • 26-1-0 (12 KOs)
3 **TORI NELSON**
U.S. • 20-2-3 (4 KOs)
4 **TAYLA HARRIS**
Australia • 7-0-1 (3 KOs)
5 **EMA KOZIN**
Slovenia • 21-0-1 (11 KOs)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS

C **CLARESSA SHIELDS** WBC, WBO, IBF
U.S. • 11-0-0 (2 KOs)
1 **MARIE EVE DICAIRE**
Canada • 17-1-0 (0 KOs)
2 **HANNA GABRIELS** WBA
Costa Rica • 21-2-1 (12 KOs)
3 **MIKAELA LAUREN**
Sweden • 32-6-0 (13 KOs)
4 **CHRIS NAMUS**
Uruguay • 25-6-0 (8 KOs)
5 **PATRICIA BERGHULT**
Sweden • 14-0-0 (3 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS

C **JESSICA MCCASKILL** IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
U.S. • 10-2-0 (3 KOs)
1 **CECILIA BRAEKHUS**
Norway • 36-2-0 (9 KOs)
2 **LAYLA MCCARTER**
U.S. • 44-13-5 (11 KOs)
3 **ORNELLA DOMINI**
Switzerland • 15-2-0 (3 KOs)
4 **VICTORIA BUSTOS**
Argentina • 20-6-0 (0 KOs)
5 **LOLITA MUZEYA**
Zambia • 16-0-0 (8 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **CHRISTINA LINARDATOU** WBO
Greece • 13-2-0 (6 KOs)
2 **MARY MCGEE** IBF
U.S. • 27-3-0 (15 KOs)
3 **CHANTELLE CAMERON** WBC
U.K. • 13-0-0 (7 KOs)
4 **ERICA FARIAS**
Argentina • 26-4-0 (10 KOs)
5 **KALI REIS** WBA
U.S. • 17-7-1 (5 KOs)

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS

C **KATIE TAYLOR** RING, IBF, WBA, WBC, WBO
Ireland • 18-0-0 (6 KOs)
1 **DELFINE PERSOON**
Belgium • 44-3-0 (18 KOs)
2 **CHANTELLE CAMERON**
U.K. • 13-0-0 (7 KOs)
3 **ESTELLE MOSSELY**
Belgium • 9-0-0 (1 KOs)
4 **MIRIAM GUTIERREZ**
Spain • 13-1-0 (5 KOs)
5 **NATASHA JONAS**
U.K. • 9-2-1 (7 KOs)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **TERRI HARPER** WBC
U.K. • 11-0-1 (6 KOs)
2 **MAIVA HAMADOUCHE** IBF
France • 22-1-0 (18 KOs)
3 **MIKAELA MAYER** WBO
U.S. • 14-0-0 (5 KOs)
4 **HYUN MI CHOI** WBA
South Korea • 18-0-1 (4 KOs)
5 **EWA BRODNICKA**
Poland • 20-1-0 (2 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **AMANDA SERRANO** WBO
Puerto Rico • 40-1-1 (30 KOs)
2 **SARAH MAHFOUD**
Denmark • 10-0-0 (3 KOs)
3 **ERIKA CRUZ HERNANDEZ** WBA
Mexico • 13-1-0 (3 KOs)
4 **JELENA MRDJENOVICH**
Canada • 41-11-2 (19 KOs)
5 **NINA MEINKE**
Germany • 12-2-0 (3 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **JACKIE NAVA**
Mexico • 37-4-4 (16 KOs)
2 **MARCELA ACUNA** IBF
Argentina • 49-7-2 (20 KOs)
3 **DANIELA BERMUDEZ** IBF
Argentina • 29-4-3 (10 KOs)
4 **MAYERLIN RIVAS** WBA
Venezuela • 16-4-2 (10 KOs)
5 **DINA THORSLUND** WBO
Denmark • 15-0-0 (6 KOs)

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **ZULINA MUNOZ**
Mexico • 53-3-2 (30 KOs)
2 **YULIHAN LUNA AVILA** WBC
Mexico • 21-3-1 (3 KOs)
3 **MARIANA JUAREZ**
Mexico • 55-10-4 (19 KOs)
4 **MARIA CECILIA ROMAN** IBF
Argentina • 15-5-1 (0 KOs)
5 **SHANNON COURTENAY** WBA
U.K. • 7-1-0 (3 KOs)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **LOURDES JUAREZ** WBC
Mexico • 31-2-0 (4 KOs)
2 **GUADALUPE MARTINEZ**
Mexico • 20-10-0 (6 KOs)
3 **JESSICA CHAVEZ**
Mexico • 30-5-3 (4 KOs)
4 **DIANA FERNANDEZ**
Mexico • 23-3-0 (4 KOs)
5 **ESMERALDA MORENO**
Mexico • 35-12-2 (11 KOs)

FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **NAOKO FUJIOKA** WBA
Japan • 18-2-1 (7 KOs)
2 **ARELY MUCINO** WBO
Mexico • 29-3-2 (10 KOs)
3 **AVA KNIGHT**
U.S. • 19-2-5 (5 KOs)
4 **MARLEN ESPARZA**
U.S. • 9-1-0 (1 KOs)
5 **IBETH ZAMORA** WBC
Mexico • 32-6-0 (12 KOs)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **YESICA BOPP** WBA
Argentina • 36-1-0 (16 KOs)
2 **KENIA ENRIQUEZ**
Mexico • 23-1-0 (9 KOs)
3 **TSUNAMI TENKAI** WBO
Japan • 28-12-1 (16 KOs)
4 **EVELYN BERMUDEZ** IBF
Argentina • 13-0-1 (3 KOs)
5 **KIM CLAVEL**
Canada • 13-0-0 (2 KOs)

STRAWWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **SENIESA ESTRADA** WBA
Mexico • 20-0-0 (8 KOs)
1 **CHRISTINA RUPPRECHT** WBC
Germany • 10-0-1 (3 KOs)
3 **YOKASTA VALLE** IBF
Nicaragua • 21-2-0 (9 KOs)
2 **ANABEL ORTIZ**
Mexico • 31-4-0 (4 KOs)
4 **ETSUKO TADA**
Japan • 20-3-3 (7 KOs)

ATOMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 102 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**
1 **MONSERRAT ALARCON** WBA
Mexico • 15-4-2 (0 KOs)
2 **FABIANA BYTYQI** WBC
Czech Rep. • 17-0-1 (5 KOs)
3 **MIKA IWAKAWA** WBO
Japan • 10-5-1 (3 KOs)
4 **NAO IKEYAMA**
Japan • 18-6-4 (5 KOs)
5 **ERI MATSUDA**
Japan • 4-0-1 (1 KO)

NEXT STOP: UNDISPUTED

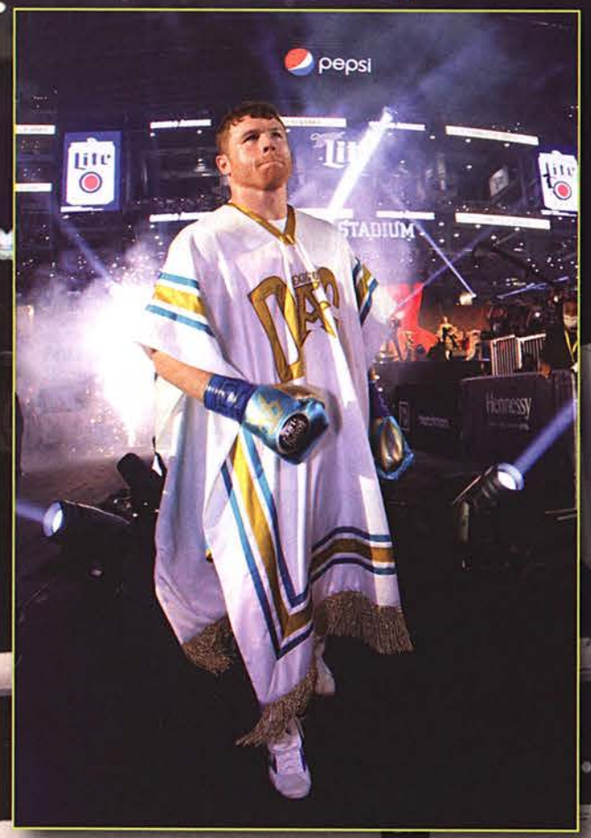
WITH **BILLY JOE SAUNDERS'** WBO BELT NOW AROUND HIS WAIST, **CANELO ALVAREZ** IS ONE FIGHT AWAY FROM MAKING SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHT HISTORY

By **Dan Rafael**

As significant as Canelo Alvarez's super middleweight title-unification showdown against Billy Joe Saunders was, the pound-for-pound king viewed the fight simply as the next logical step in an effort to fulfill his goal of becoming the first undisputed 168-pound world champion.

So, when Alvarez literally broke Saunders' face and forced trainer Mark Tibbs to throw in the towel with Saunders on the stool following the eighth round, there was only a short-lived and mild in-ring celebration. It included a brief ride on trainer/manager Eddy Reynoso's shoulders so Alvarez could salute the fans that filled AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, as boxing regained a sense of normalcy amid the easing of coronavirus restrictions.

About an hour later, Alvarez, sporting only a small bruise under his left eye to indicate the combat he had just participated in, arrived at his post-fight news conference, where he was more interested in talking to the media



PHOTOS BY MICHELLE FARSI/MATCHROOM

»

"Right now I am really happy with what we've achieved," said Mexico's Alvarez, who spoke in English regularly, more than he ever has, during fight week. "I'm going to celebrate with my family. You already know what I want, and hopefully we can get that fight going and I can unify the titles."

Alvarez's bout with Saunders was his third fight in five months, an unheard-of level of activity in this era for an elite boxer. But he took each of them with a singular purpose in mind. What the Ring/WBA/WBC/WBO champion wants now is IBF titleholder Caleb Plant on Mexican Independence Day weekend in mid-September, which would be the culmination of what has been a whirlwind effort to make history with the first super middleweight undisputed championship fight of either the three- or four-belt era.

On December 19, Alvarez rolled to a one-sided decision over Callum Smith to win the Ring championship, Smith's WBA title and the vacant WBC belt. Part of the deal for the fight was the stipulation that the winner would next make a WBC mandatory defense against Avni Yildirim, which Alvarez did on February 27, blowing him out – as expected – in the third round.

That victory set the stage for Alvarez to meet WBO titlist Saunders in an event that was originally planned for May 2, 2020, at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas. The fight had been signed and the press release announcing it was ready to be blasted to media members, but it never happened. The day before the announcement was scheduled to be made, the NBA postponed the remainder of its season and the sports world followed by shutting down as the pandemic took hold in

Canelo's timing and crunching power shots trumped Saunders' slickness and finesse.

ED MULHOLLAND/MATCHROOM

the United States.

A year later, Alvarez and Saunders finally met for even greater stakes with the additional belts involved. The event was seen as a symbolic end of the pandemic, or at least a sign that there was light at the end of the tunnel, because Texas' capacity limits had largely been lifted.

The day before the fight, 5,000 fans – the allowable capacity – turned out under a blazing sun in front of the stadium for the weigh-in, a portent of the wild atmosphere that would engulf the home of the Dallas Cowboys the following night.

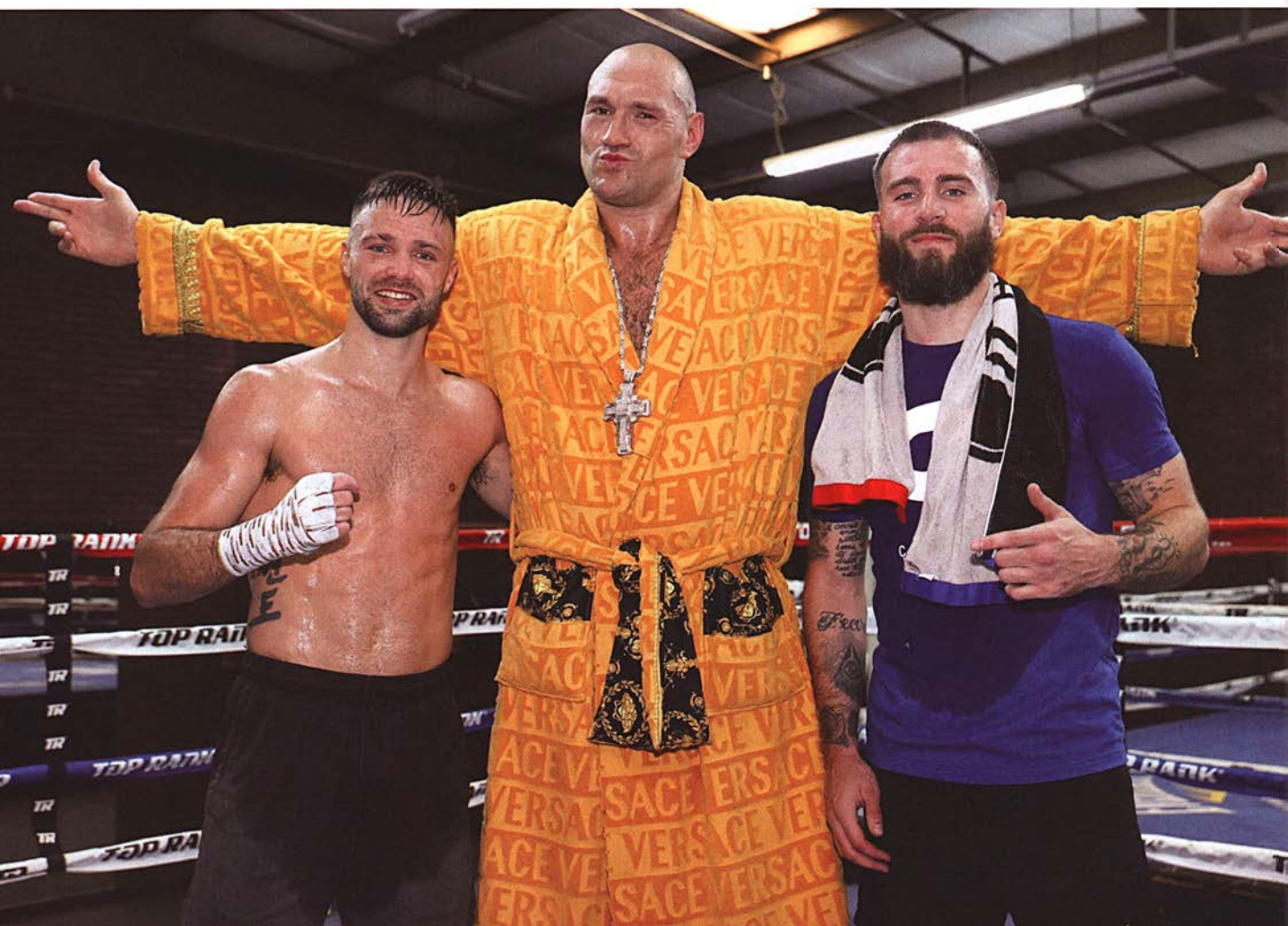
A United States indoor boxing record crowd announced at 73,126 turned out to cheer wildly for Alvarez on May 8 – Cinco de Mayo weekend. It smashed the previous record of 63,352 for the heavyweight championship rematch between Muhammad Ali and Leon Spinks at the Superdome in New Orleans on September 15, 1978. Alvarez-Saunders produced the largest crowd of any kind in North America to that point since the beginning of the pandemic, surpassing the 51,838 that attended the Kentucky Derby in Louisville, Kentucky, on May 1.

With the four-division titleholder from Guadalajara the overwhelming fan favorite, the crowd got what it wanted in another glorious Canelo victory. It was one that was tricky at times, due to the southpaw Saunders' boxing skills and quickness, but one that was never in doubt.

The Englishman spent a large portion of the promotion complaining about this and that. He was unhappy there was no British judge on the panel. He moaned that Matchroom Boxing's Eddie Hearn, the promoter of both fighters, was favoring Alvarez. And then as fight week arrived, he threatened to pull out because he was upset over the size of the ring.

Saunders wanted to have a ring as spacious as possible in order to use his lateral movement while Alvarez, the stalking power puncher, wanted him to have as little space as possible to operate.

Alvarez would have been content with a ring 20 feet by 20 feet inside the ropes, a standard size well within the rules of the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation, which oversees boxing in the state. Saunders at first demanded a 24-foot ring, also within the rules but uncommon, and then said he would fight if the ring was 22 feet by 22 feet inside the ropes. British contender John Ryder was on site as a standby to fill in had Saunders actually pulled out, but it seemed incomprehensible that he would give up the chance to unify titles and make a career-high payday of $8 million. Alvarez, who banked at least $25 million, could have easily called the bluff, but ultimately he



Caleb Plant (right), pictured with Josh Taylor and Tyson Fury, holds the only title Canelo hasn't won.

Eddie Hearn promoted both Alvarez and Saunders, so the Matchroom boss couldn't lose.

gave Saunders his way, reasoning that when he beat Saunders he wanted there to be no possible excuse for the defeat.

The larger ring could not rescue Saunders (30-1, 14 KOs) from Alvarez's destructive punches to the head and body. The 30-year-old Alvarez was the aggressor and landed far heavier punches than Saunders, who had some success boxing and moving in the middle rounds. Saunders, 31, often dropped his hands to his side, daring Alvarez to hit him, but could never get anything going consistently on offense. Alvarez, unfazed by Saunders' punches, moved straight ahead and whacked him to the head and body constantly.

Alvarez appeared to have assumed control of the fight before he had a huge eighth round. He hurt Saunders with a left hook to the head and seemed to sense the end was near as he raised his fist and motioned to the crowd, which cheered his flamboyance with abandon. Then Alvarez slammed home a right uppercut that landed flush on the right side of a crouching Saunders' face and again raised his fist toward the crowd, to which the fans responded with another thunderous roar.

The right hands continued to rain down, and late in the round Alvarez bent Saunders over with a body shot. By the time the eighth round was over, Saunders' right eye was swollen and closed. Tibbs eventually motioned to referee Mark Calo-oy to stop the fight.

Alvarez (56-1-2, 38 KOs), who had predicted he would break Saunders down and stop him between the eighth and 10th rounds, said he felt the powerful right uppercut dig into Saunders' face. He said he knew the damage he'd done as soon as it landed.

"I saw when he broke his cheekbone, and I went back to the corner and I told Eddy that I didn't think that he could continue," said Alvarez, who led 78-74, 78-74 and 77-75 at the time of the stoppage.

"When you break a cheekbone, you can risk your life, and you can't continue that way. This is what we knew was going to happen, and I'm really happy with what I did. I love what I do, and I knew what I did with that punch."

Saunders, a former middleweight titlist making his third super middleweight defense, was taken to John Peter Smith Hospital in nearby Fort Worth immediately after the fight and the following day had surgery to repair injuries to his orbital bone and cheek.

"Broken eye socket and broken cheekbone in three places. Operation all went well," Saunders wrote on social media in his only post-fight comments. "You win some and lose some. Didn't feel out of my league

NEXT STOP: UNDISPUTED

but got caught with a good shot and couldn't see."

While Saunders faces a long recovery, Alvarez quickly moved on to discussing the prospect of a deal to fight Plant (21-0, 12 KOs), 28, of Las Vegas, who is aligned with Premier Boxing Champions and has been fighting on Fox.

"That's the plan, to go for the belt," Alvarez said. "I'm coming."

Unlike many big fights, promotional and network alliances will be no issue in a potential Alvarez-Plant clash, because the bout with Saunders marked the expiration of Alvarez's two-fight deal with Hearn and his obligation to streaming service DAZN. He is a broadcast and a promotional free agent even though he has said many times that he plans to continue working with Hearn.

Hearn, ever the optimist, said he believes the fight can be made without many issues.

"Not complicated," Hearn said. "It's the beauty of Canelo's decision to be a network free agent. So it stops politics, stops anything from getting in the way. The numbers on DAZN were absolutely astronomical. They're going to have to – and they will – make a huge offer for that fight. Fox will also make a huge offer for that fight. But he's free to make the fights that he wants to make, where he wants those fights to happen. So, for me, I think it's a very straightforward process. I think that process should start immediately, and I don't see any complications with his position."

Hearn said he had made plans to meet in Las Vegas with Plant manager Luis DeCubas Jr., one of PBC boss Al Haymon's most trusted lieutenants, to get the ball rolling toward a deal.

"There's no excuse why the Caleb Plant fight shouldn't be made," Hearn said. "It's the only fight to make happen. It's the only fight, and I hope Caleb Plant feels the same way."

Plant has said repeatedly that he is interested in the fight, one that can bring him more glory and money than any other potential fight by multiples.

"I feel like with this fight, right there I can knock out two birds with one stone, [beat] a modern-day legend and become undisputed," Plant, who is coming off a shutout decision over mandatory challenger and former titlist Caleb Truax on January 30, said on The PBC Podcast after having watched Alvarez-Saunders. "Everything I've ever wanted out of boxing, I can attain in one night. Like I said, that's what I'm focused on. That's where my eyes are set."

Alvarez has spoken often about facing Plant for the undisputed title, even just days before the fight with Saunders, and, of course, afterward – even after WBO middleweight titlist Demetrius Andrade crashed the post-fight news conference and called out Alvarez in a scene that began friendly enough with Andrade congratulating Alvarez and Alvarez thanking him. But it soon turned ugly with the Hearn-promoted Andrade (30-0, 18 KOs), who has been unable to land a meaningful fight despite enormous talent and a big mouth, and his father/trainer Paul Andrade shouting at Alvarez. The smile on Alvarez's face quickly melted away and he shouted back at them in English to "get the fuck outta here. Please, get the fuck outta here" and gestured dismissively before Team Andrade was removed from the room.

Alvarez brushed the interruption off and continued to pleasantly answer more questions. Forget Andrade. Forget a return to light heavyweight. Forget even a third fight with Gennadiy Golovkin, for the time being. He is focused on fighting Plant and beating him to make history as the undisputed champion.

"We have this goal that is a short-term goal right now," Alvarez said. "Hopefully, we can make that fight happen, but if that fight doesn't happen, we can continue to make history in other ways. Right now it's my goal to unify the super middleweight division and, hopefully, we can continue to work toward that." RING

There was a real sense of normality for the 73,126 fans in attendance.

ARE YOU NOT ENTERTAINED?

THOSE WHO CRITICIZED **BILLY JOE SAUNDERS** FOR 'QUITTING' AGAINST **CANELO ALVAREZ** SHOULD STOP AND CONSIDER WHAT'S REALLY AT STAKE IN A BOXING RING

By **Ron Borges**

It has long been said that prizefighters agree to a warriors' code, which is best summed up by a willingness to be "carried out on their shield." This is most often stated by people who have never come close to facing the need to be carried out on their shields.

It is all well and good for a fighter to say he would choose to die in the ring or suffer great bodily harm rather than have a fight stopped, but is this really a standard any of us should hold an athlete to? Fighters are not warriors and boxing is a sport, not warfare. What other athletic endeavor calls someone a quitter if they leave the field, or even the octagon in the case

MICHELLE FARSI/MATCHROOM.

It's conceivable that Saunders' life, as well as his eyesight, was at risk against Canelo.

of mixed martial arts, because their cheek has caved in or their orbital bone has been shattered in several places, putting the athlete in danger of permanent blindness or worse?

We all admire the athlete who plays through pain, but even MMA recognizes there is a limit. So why are so many ready to insist there is none inside a boxing ring? Frankly, if those of us who love the sport of boxing insist it go that far merely to entertain us, then we are our own advertisement for boxing's abolition, as its critics have long sought.

On May 8 at AT&T Stadium outside of Dallas, undefeated WBO super middleweight titleholder Billy Joe Saunders was doing the best he could, and frankly better than most had expected, against unified champion Saul "Canelo" Alvarez in front of a record-setting crowd of 73,126 screaming fans until Alvarez laced him with a vicious uppercut that shattered the orbital bone around his right eye in three places. Saunders did not take a knee. He boxed the remaining seconds of the eighth round, then walked to his corner with his eye already closing like a venetian blind.

By the time Saunders sat on his stool, his trainer, Mark Tibbs, realized his fighter could not see and was in considerable pain and stopped the fight. Saunders did not protest. And why should he? He was already behind and fighting with one eye was not likely to enhance his chances of turning things around.

The broadcasters on DAZN immediately said he'd "quit." Sergio Mora, a former fighter himself who should have known better, said, "When the going got tough, Billy Joe Saunders didn't get up from the stool." Analyst Chris Mannix was more forthright. He said Saunders quit.

Only Saunders' countryman, Carl Froch, argued for moderation, saying, "I think that eye is more damaged than we think."

Indeed it was, but that didn't stop British boxing writer Jeff Powell from opining in the Daily Mail, "Saunders went out of the biggest fight he will ever have in his life on his stool. Not his shield. ... However blinded his eye and agonizing the internally bleeding wound ... such a submission is anathema to the fighting culture of the traveller community."

Powell also pointed out that Saunders chose to enter the ring to the recorded words of Winston Churchill's famous World War II radio address to the British people. While under constant bombing attack from Nazi Germany's Luftwaffe, the then-prime minister said, "We will never surrender." Powell wrote, "How cruel the irony."

Actually, truth be told, how cruel the thought that this is what fight fans and the sport itself demand. Toughness? Yes. Grit? Absolutely.

Saunders' team made the correct decision in pulling him out.

Fighting long odds? Indeed. Overcoming bloody cuts and concussive disorientation? Sadly so.

But where is it written in anyone's contract, on paper or simply in some philosophical theory, that there is no limit short of death or total destruction before a man can honorably conclude he has had enough?

As the broadcasters hollered various forms of "quitter," the Twittersphere was awhirl with comments like one on Instagram from former junior middleweight titleholder Fernando Vargas, who called Saunders "an embarrassment" for "quitting like a bitch" because of "a little scratch" to his eye. Vargas was far from alone. But was any of it fair?

It all reminded me of my old friend Dr. Ferdie Pacheco making the biggest verbal blunder of his career during his call on Showtime of the Gerald McClellan-Nigel Benn super middleweight title fight on February 25, 1995, at the London Arena. With a large lead going into the 10th round after having twice dropped Benn, including once knocking him out of the ring in the first round, a constantly blinking McClellan suddenly took a knee following a good right hand from Benn. He got up, but a short uppercut put him down again and this time he squatted on one knee until he was counted out.

Pacheco and blow-by-blow announcer Steve Albert had both mentioned the unusualness of McCllellan's blinking and his having begun to push his mouthpiece out of his mouth repeatedly. Pacheco also called the first knockdown "the strangest I've seen," and both hinted that perhaps the American challenger had a problem yet unknown.

Still, Pacheco, who had a well-earned reputation for being a safety-first ring doctor and commentator, added, "I never saw a guy quit in a corner like that." Later, he said, "That wasn't anything but quit unless something happened to him."

By that time, McClellan was lying on the canvas surrounded by medical personnel who were putting him in a neck brace, giving him oxygen and preparing to carry him out of the ring on a stretcher. Obviously something had happened to him. Yet even with all that visual evidence of a man in distress, Pacheco asked an incredulous Benn, "What do you think happened when he quit in apparently a not-hurt kind of situation?"

Gerald McClellan went blind that night, suffered a blood clot on his brain and has spent most of his waking hours ever since crippled and in a wheelchair, needing around the clock care from his sisters to simply survive. Yet even a physician who should have known better was saying he quit even as he was having an oxygen mask strapped to his face.

Pacheco wasn't alone that night. Also calling the fight at ringside for British television was former lightweight champion Jim Watt, an erudite Scotsman and knowledgeable boxing man, who said to fellow broadcaster Reg Gutteridge, "He's quit, Reg. He's quit."

He would go on to say Benn had "punched the fight out of Gerald McClellan" and that McClellan's "chin could still take the punches but his heart could not." Years later, Watt, a good man but one blinded by the warrior's code he had lived by, said in an interview he remained mortified by what he'd said that night.

This is not to single out any one person for uttering such nonsense in the heat of the moment. Nor is it an attempt to deny that, in fact, some fighters do quit. It is merely a cautionary tale about a rush to judgment too often made about a fighter's motives by people who have never been in a harsh argument, let alone had their orbital bone shattered or their brain addled.

The great irony of this for Saunders is that barely six months earlier, he was among the harsh chorus criticizing heavyweight prospect Daniel Dubois for taking a knee against Joe Joyce and being counted out after suffering the exact same orbital bone fracture that would convince Saunders to retire on his stool.

"Before I go on one knee, I'd like to go out on my back with my pulse stopped," Saunders told a DAZN interviewer. "That's the path in life we choose for a living ... If my two eye sockets were broken ... I was not stopping until I was knocked out or worse. I don't agree with a man taking the knee and letting the referee count him out ... Get carried out of the ring, brother. Get carried out of the ring."

As Billy Joe Saunders and hopefully boxing fans and media have since learned, it is far easier to make such a demand when that demand has not been put upon yourself. Certainly we glorify someone like Diego Corrales for twice getting off the floor in the 10th round with a badly swollen eye and stopping Jose Luis Castillo. It was a remarkable moment. What no one remembers is that Corrales never won another fight.

Fighters owe their opponent, their sport and the fans who support them their best effort. They owe them pride and courage and a willingness to fight on when most of us would have long before declined to continue.

What they do not owe us is their life or suffering the kind of life-altering injuries Saunders might have sustained had he taken another shot or two in that broken cheek and bone fragments punctured his eye and rendered him half-blind. Is that really what we as fight fans should demand?

More to the point, as Billy Joe Saunders bitterly learned the hard way, is it really quitting when you simply cannot go on?

The answer should be obvious, but in case the point still eludes you, it is not. Even cage fighters are allowed to tap out when all is lost and they are in danger of great bodily harm.

Why does doing the same thing inside a boxing ring make a fighter a quitter?

WBO
WBC
DK
GERMAN DÖNER KEBAB

THE KEYS TO THE CASTLE

JOSH TAYLOR'S HISTORY-MAKING VICTORY OVER **JOSE RAMIREZ** HAS PUT THE SCOTSMAN IN THE COMPANY OF ALL-TIME GREATS

By **Norm Frauenheim**

The belts hung from Josh Taylor's forearms and sometimes across his shoulders. They were a perfect fit, one that looked as if it had been tailored years ago for that moment when Taylor would wear one and all, a seamless and singular collection.

The price tag was there, too. Swollen eyes and dried blood marked his face. A darkening bump the size of a purple grape grew at the top of his left hand, which was already bleeding at knuckles that had been at the point of attack in his victory over Jose Ramirez.

Belts and bruises, side-by-side, were all in place, complementary accessories after a rare fight for a unified title. Unified can mean just about anything these days. From multiple titles and feuding promoters, boxing is nothing if not divided. Undisputed is a contradiction in the balkanized game. There'd be no game without the dispute.

On May 22 in a Sin City hotel named Virgin, however, the pieces all came together to create a compelling picture of a fight for the unified junior welterweight championship.

For one night, unified meant genuine.

For the historical record, Taylor goes down as the fifth – maybe sixth – undisputed champ in what is being called the four-belt – WBC, IBF, WBO and WBA – era.

Taylor joins Oleksandr Usyk (undisputed at cruiserweight in 2018), Terence Crawford (junior welterweight in 2017), Jermain Taylor (middleweight in 2005)

To the victor goes the spoils. Taylor now holds every legitimate title available in the 140-pound division.

MIKEY WILLIAMS/TOP RANK

and Bernard Hopkins (middleweight from 2004-2005). It goes without saying the aforementioned fighters were also Ring Magazine champs.

Ring lightweight champ Teofimo Lopez claims that he too earned undisputed status with his upset of Vasiliy Lomachenko. However, it counts only if the WBC's confusing franchise title can be a legit part of the four-belt era. That's still up for debate. For now, the WBC has two lightweight champs: Lopez and Devin Haney.

But there is only one at junior welterweight. Taylor made sure of that.

There was no dispute at all about Taylor's convincing performance against Ramirez. The belts were there, but only part of the supporting cast for what Taylor and Ramirez delivered.

From start to finish, it was the fight itself. Their respective resumes were unblemished and unadorned by social-media numbers. Their birthdays put them squarely in their primes. Taylor is 30; Ramirez is 28. We wouldn't have to wait to see them fight on Triller.

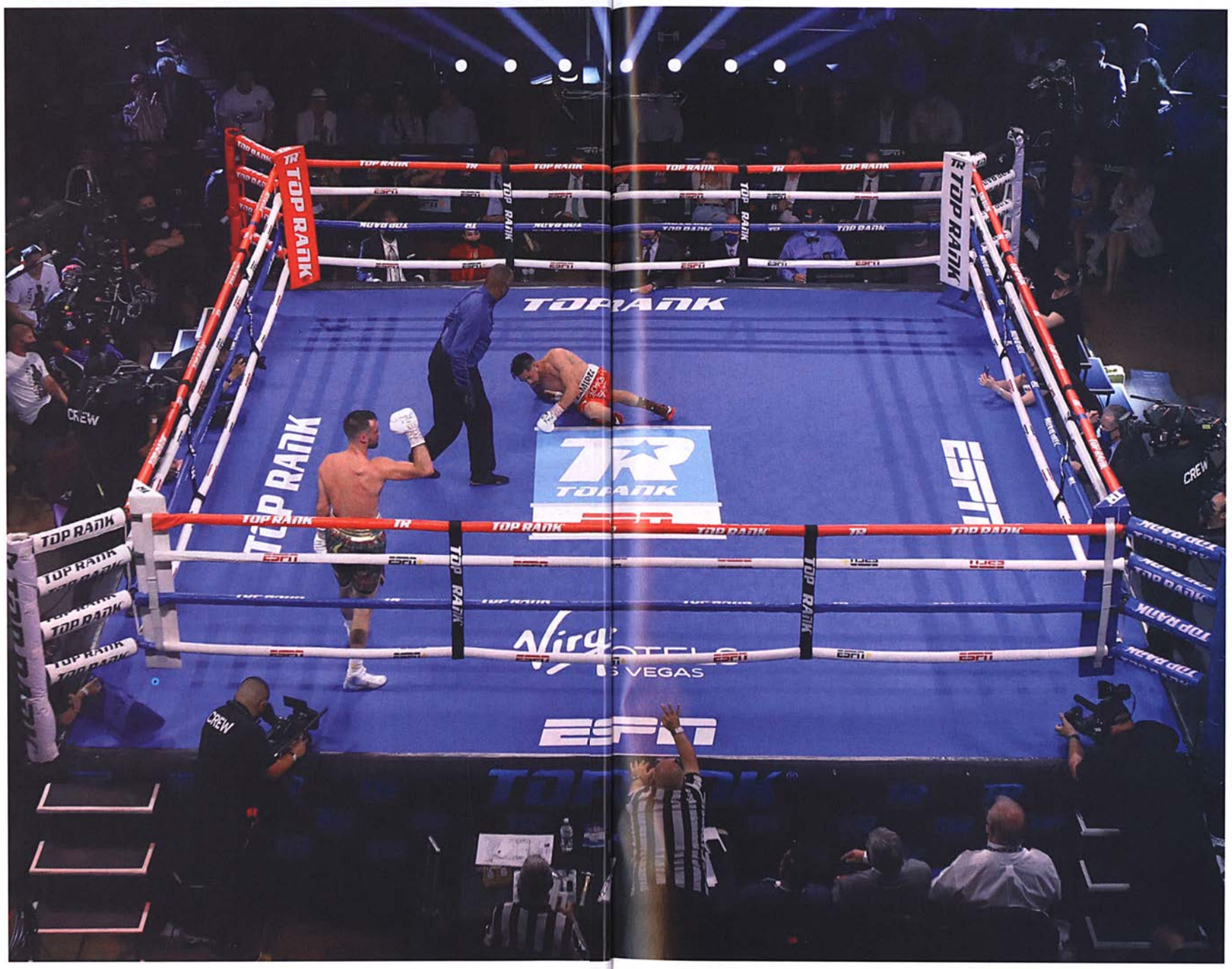
The time was now. History beckoned and they answered, each motivated by an ambition to be the best. Money didn't seem to matter. The live gate was limited to 750 customers by Nevada's COVID restrictions. The split was 50-50 of what was believed to be $4.75 million, also the total purse for Lopez-Lomachenko in October.

A bigger payoff promises to come later. Legacy couldn't wait.

"This is a historical fight for me," Ramirez said before the opening bell. "This could open up the doors for the Hall of Fame for me in the future."

After it was over, Taylor talked about a victory that fulfilled a dream. His unanimous decision over Ramirez was also a springboard, one that has put him into the pound-for-pound Top 5 and maybe into some hallowed real estate. Taylor said he wants to fight at Edinburgh Castle, the heart of Scottish history. His history.

"I've trained my whole life for this," he said. "I've dedicated my whole life for this moment. I've dreamt of it so many times over, man. I'm so, so happy. I'm over the moon."



Taylor's second knockdown looked like a finisher, but Ramirez rose to his feet and fought hard until the final bell.

The journey over the moon came down to two rounds, both decided by Taylor's lethal left. Taylor landed it twice, once in the sixth and again in the seventh, knocking Ramirez down each time.

Without both, the fight would have been a draw. Judges Tim Cheatham, Dave Moretti and Steve Weisfeld scored it 114-112 each, all for Taylor.

"A disgrace," Taylor said in a post-fight news conference in a suite above the ring.

But Taylor also muted his complaints about the scoring. After all, the right guy won.

"I thought the scorecards were a little bit tight," Taylor said. "I thought they were well wider than that. You know, and I wasn't too happy with the selection of the judges, but I wasn't going to moan, because I was so confident in winning this fight anyway."

Not everybody agreed with Taylor's dispute with the judges. Promoter Bob Arum thought Cheatham, Moretti and Weisfeld got it right.

"Spot-on," said Arum, who looked at cards that add up to reasons for a rematch, this time with a live gate not limited by COVID restrictions. "Six-to-six. The knockdowns were the difference."

From the perspective of Taylor and his trainer, Ben Davison, the knockdowns were, first, a product of some psychology and, second, well-timed awareness.

Two days before the opening bell, Taylor turned up the rhetoric. The Scot calls himself "The Tartan Tornado." At the final news conference and then the weigh-in, he transformed himself into "The Trash Talker." Ramirez reacted, a surprise from an otherwise soft-spoken son of farmworkers in central California. The hostility escalated. Moments after the weigh-in on the Friday before the fight, there was an altercation.

The fighters left the ballroom and headed through a hallway full of Ramirez's ardent fans from Fresno. The fighters arrived at the hotel elevators at the same time. They shoved each other. Ramirez acted out of character, a sure sign to Taylor and his corner that the trash talk was working. Ramirez's anger was genuine. Like a psychic jab, Taylor's pointed words had pierced his poise.

"We wanted to use his aggression against him," Davison said.

The plan may have been that an angry Ramirez would behave recklessly, but the initial intensity and energy behind the pursuit seemed to surprise Taylor. In the third, the Scot looked dazed. Early in the sixth, however, Ramirez's chin seemed to get out in front of his hands. He was exposed. Boom, Taylor landed that left overhand counter.

Ramirez was quick to get back onto his feet. But the fight had changed. Taylor had the momentum, and he would seize it for good in the next round. The seventh was decisive. It was also controversial because of what referee Kenny Bayless did or didn't do.

Late in the round, Ramirez and Taylor got tangled in a clinch. Bayless was slow to separate them. He stepped in and slapped Ramirez on the arm. As the fighters untangled and Bayless took a step back, Taylor pounced with predatory instinct. He immediately fired a left uppercut at Ramirez, who had left himself undefended.

Ramirez's hands were at his side as Taylor's explosive left landed on his chin. Ramirez hit the canvas in what looked like a helpless heap. A thud echoed throughout the theater. It looked as if it was over. But it wasn't. Hurt yet ever resilient, Ramirez struggled to get up. Somehow he survived the round's final seconds.

"I actually think the referee gave him too much time," Taylor said.

"That should have been fight over. He was very tough. Hats off to Ramírez. But after I put him down, the fight was on my terms."

Ramirez agreed that the fight had shifted in Taylor's favor. Shifted for good. He also expressed some surprise at how the knockdown came about. But he accepted some of the blame. After all, he had forgotten a fundamental rule: Protect yourself at all times.

Ramirez said Bayless had warned about clinching during pre-fight instructions.

"I felt like his job was to break us, because he said, 'As long as you guys clinch, I'm going to come in and separate you,'" Ramirez said. "I stepped back, but [Taylor] threw an uppercut."

But the rare anger that Ramirez had shown before the fight was gone. He wouldn't criticize Bayless.

"Maybe I was a little too nice," he said. "Maybe I wasn't as disciplined as I needed to be in the clinches."

FOR TAYLOR, A UNIFIED TITLE WAS ONLY AN EARLY CHAPTER IN A FURTHER PURSUIT OF HISTORY. HE INTENDS TO MAKE A LOT MORE.

What he would not do is indulge in the blame game that scars so many post-fight news conferences. Ramirez is a nice guy, to be sure. His fight for water rights on behalf of farmworkers is proof of that. But he's also accountable, willing to accept responsibility for what he didn't do in his first pro loss.

"Man, we've got to learn how to lose," Ramirez said when pressed with further questions about whether Bayless should have done more, especially in the seventh. "It wasn't my night tonight."

Ramirez was also generous in his praise of Taylor, who apologized for the trash talk.

"No disrespect," Taylor said. "I've got nothing but love for Ramirez. This week was no disrespect. It was all part of the mind games to get in his head, to make him more eager to jump in at me and be more aggressive."

Ramirez liked what he heard.

"He showed respect," he said. "He showed it was him being a competitor throughout the week. He wanted to win so bad and get in my mind. But he did apologize, because he found out my son was around.

There was animosity injected into the build-up by Taylor, who goaded Ramirez at the weigh-in.

DAVID BECKER

"I'm thankful he did that, because I told him on Friday it doesn't matter how far he gets. If he acts like that, he's not really worth that much. But I'm glad I was able to see the real side of Josh Taylor after the fight."

In the later rounds – nine through 12, Taylor appeared to get conservative. He allowed Ramirez to work his way back into contention on the scorecards.

In the 11th, Ramirez landed a right and another left that appeared to momentarily stun Taylor. He landed a head-rocking right with just seconds left in the bout. But Taylor held on to what he had already secured.

Still, CompuBox stats added up to a very close fight. Overall, Taylor landed only 11 more punches, 145 for Taylor to 134 for Ramirez.

The simple eye-test, however, showed something else.

After the second knockdown, Taylor suddenly looked bigger.

Looked stronger.

Looked to be in control.

Of the fight.

Of his future, too.

It was a look that was later confirmed by what Taylor said about the next stage in his career. Ramirez said he would be interested in a second fight, but everything pointed to Ramirez in a rematch with Jose Zepeda, who won a businesslike decision over Hank Lundy Jr. on the undercard. Zepeda lost a majority decision to Ramirez in Fresno in February 2019.

For Taylor, a unified title was only an early chapter in a further pursuit of history. He intends to make a lot more.

"I feel like this is a beginning," he said.

Taylor's priority appears to be a jump up the scale to welterweight for a fight with Crawford, the first to hold all four pieces of the 140-pound title. At this point, Crawford, a leading pound-for-pound contender, appears to have nowhere else to go.

He had hoped for a fight against Manny Pacquiao. But Pacquiao announced he has plans for an August 21 fight against Errol Spence Jr., who doesn't appear to have any interest in a welterweight showdown with Crawford.

"I'd like to go up and chase a real, real big fight, like Terence Crawford," Taylor said. "I'm not going to call him out and stuff. I just think he's a great fighter. But I just think two undisputed champions going at it at 147 would be awesome. Would be amazing."

The battle concluded, Taylor apologized for his conduct and told Ramirez that it was all mind games.

But first, Taylor has a WBO mandatory title defense on deck against Jake Catterall (26-0, 13 KOs), who stepped aside to allow the Taylor-Ramirez fight to happen on May 22. But now Catterall has crossed the moat and is knocking on the castle doors.

"Great!" Caterrall said in a congratulatory tweet to Taylor. "Edinburgh Castle, let's make it happen."

Taylor had a more immediate item on his itinerary, however, a compelling symbol, in the history he had promised.

He planned to visit the great Ken Buchanan, who is now 75 and has been the face of Scottish boxing since taking a 135-pound title from Ismael Laguna in 1970 and unifying it with a second belt against Ruben Navarro in 1971.

"I did it just like you, champ!" Taylor said moments after beating Ramirez. "I'll see you when I get home. Much love."

Much unity, too. RING

MEXICO
MEXICO
First

MIGUEL COTTO: GREATEST HITS

HERE ARE SIX PERFORMANCES THAT HELPED CEMENT THE FOUR-WEIGHT WORLD CHAMPION'S POSITION AS A MODERN-DAY LEGEND

By **Anson Wainwright**

Cotto proved too much for fellow modern great Sugar Shane Mosley in their 2007 matchup (above).

Miguel Cotto is unquestionably one of the most accomplished fighters of the modern era, collecting six world titles in four divisions. The Puerto Rican, a man of few words who let his fists do the talking, sought to test himself against the very best of his era and did so repeatedly during a near-17-year career.

Cotto was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in October 1980. His family migrated back to the sunnier climes of their ancestral home in Puerto Rico when he was 2 years old. He took up boxing when he was 11.

Cotto took silver at the world junior championships and appeared at the Olympics in 2000 before exiting the amateur ranks with a record of 125-23.

After turning professional, Cotto won the WBO junior welterweight title in September 2004, stopping Kelson Pinto in six rounds. He made six successful defenses, turning back the likes of former titleholders Randall Bailey (TKO 6) and DeMarcus Corley (TKO 5), as well as former amateur nemesis Muhammad Abdullaev (TKO 9).

In December 2006, Cotto stepped up to welterweight and stopped countryman Carlos Quintana (TKO 5) for the vacant WBA title. He then stopped Zab Judah (TKO 11) and bested Shane Mosley (UD 12) in 2007. Those wins catapulted him to the top of The Ring's 147-pound rankings, advanced him up pound-for-pound lists and toward stardom.

In the summer of 2008, Cotto and Antonio Margarito collided in another chapter of the heated rivalry between Puerto Rico and Mexico. Although Cotto took an early lead, Margarito came on in the later rounds and bludgeoned Cotto

Cotto never cut corners during his preparation for battle.

into his first defeat as a professional. The fight became tinged with controversy when Margarito had his boxing license revoked for improper hand wraps prior to his title defense against Shane Mosley, the fight that followed the Mexican's victory over Cotto, who suspected foul play in their fight.

To his credit, Cotto rebounded to win the WBO 147-pound title and successfully defended it, but he then lost to a prime Manny Pacquiao in November 2009. Cotto moved up again, heading to junior middleweight to win a world title in a third weight class by stopping Yuri Foreman in nine rounds at Yankee Stadium.

Cotto avenged the Margarito loss before losing back-to-back fights with Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Austin Trout, leading many to believe his glory days had ended. However, the popular Boricua was able to rise again in his spiritual home of Madison Square Garden, dropping Sergio Martinez four times to claim the Ring and WBC middleweight titles by 10th-round stoppage in June 2014.

Adding belts in a fourth weight class was the icing on the cake to a hall of fame-worthy career. The modest Puerto Rican is happy to be in the company of legendary peers such as Wilfred Benitez, Felix Trinidad, Carlos Ortiz and Wilfredo Gomez.

"As a Puerto Rican, I respect all of them, especially Felix Trinidad," he said. "He knows I feel a lot of respect for him. I have no right to put myself in this league. I just did my work the best way possible. The critics of boxing, it is their job to decide that."

After losing to Canelo Alvarez, he dropped back to junior middleweight and regained the WBO title. Cotto (41-6, 33 knockouts) retired after dropping a decision to Sadam Ali in December 2017.

Cotto, now 40, is married, has five children and lives in Caguas, Puerto Rico. He owns Miguel Cotto Promotions, which has produced world-class fighters and titleholders. He also owns real estate and gas stations. »

KELSON PINTO

September 11, 2004, Coliseo Jose Miguel Agrelot, Hato Rey, Puerto Rico • Titles: WBO junior welterweight

"Pinto was a guy who beat me twice as an amateur boxer, and it was just a revenge moment for me. It was a pleasure for me to get my first title and beat him. I had to take this moment to show the world that I have more than him; I became a better boxer than Pinto as a professional boxer. I enjoyed my whole career, I enjoyed every fight, but this one in particular has a better flavor, a special flavor, to become a champion here in Puerto Rico. [After the fight,] I just drove back home and rested with my family."

RESULT: COTTO
TKO 6

MUHAMMAD ABDULLAEV

June 11, 2005, Madison Square Garden, New York • Titles: WBO junior welterweight

"I arrived at the Olympics back in 2000 in Sydney, Australia, with the idea of getting close or winning the medal, but Muhammad beat me as an amateur boxer. Having the opportunity of facing him as a professional boxer was a revelation moment for myself, just to prove again that I was better than the guy who beat me as an amateur boxer. I was a different boxer from the boxer he faced in Australia. I just proved to myself that the sky was the limit for me. ... I just woke up every morning to work as hard as I could for every opportunity I got. Not just this fight, [but] every fight at Madison Square Garden. It was just a special place for me to fight. The Garden became my house."

RESULT: COTTO
TKO 9

SHANE MOSLEY

November 10, 2007, Madison Square Garden, New York • Titles: WBA welterweight

"I believe that he thought he was the quicker, faster one, that he was going to be the better one, but the best thing I did was that I beat him at his own game. Whatever he planned to do to me, I did it in a better way. He was a good boxer; he was a smart boxer. But on this night, I was a better boxer than him. I think Mosley was a revelation in Miguel Cotto's career; he was a guy who put Miguel Cotto where he's going to be for the rest of my career. It put me in the best place I [could] be at that moment."

RESULT: COTTO UD 12

YURI FOREMAN

June 5, 2010, Yankee Stadium, Bronx, New York • Titles: WBA junior middleweight

"We were training in Tampa, Florida, and on a day off from the gym, me and (Miguel Cotto Promotions Executive Director) Bryan (Perez) went to play golf. I was driving the golf cart and I didn't hit the brakes and we went into a lake. The water covered the golf cart and we had half our bodies covered in water. It was a crazy mess but it was funny. Thanks to God, nothing bad happened to us. Yankee Stadium was one of the best venues, if not the best, I ever fought in my whole career. In there were champions, a legendary Bronx baseball team. It made me feel awesome. I was just concentrating on my boxing fight. I remember a couple of [baseball players] arrived at the locker room – I can remember Bernie Williams was there – but I kept myself occupied. I never talked about it, but I ripped off my left-hand rotator cuff in the second or third round of this fight. I never complained about it. I just kept myself focused on the fight and finally I got the victory. The injury to him (Foreman's knee was badly damaged) was no one's fault."

RESULT: COTTO TKO 9

ANTONIO MARGARITO 2

December 3, 2011, Madison Square Garden, New York • Titles: WBA junior middleweight

"I think I did the best work that I ever did against any opponent against Margarito. I am not going to respect him, never in my life; he played with my health. Boxing has to be a game of strength, condition and skills, and after that, he put plaster in his hands. I cannot respect that. It was just my moment to prove to the world. That was the fight that gives me the most satisfaction."

RESULT: COTTO TKO 9

SERGIO MARTINEZ

June 7, 2014, Madison Square Garden, New York • Titles: Ring/WBC middleweight

"The thing in boxing, as in the world, side A and side B – he didn't understand he was side B, and he believed he was taken advantage of. He was talking shit in ways that he didn't understand how the business works. I was the champion and side B of the equation against Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather Jr. I just wanted to be the side A of the equation against Martinez. Being a champion in four different weight classes means the world. I can do something no other Puerto Rican boxer could do in their careers. That does not make me better or bigger than them; it is only a number, another championship belt. It was just the biggest accomplishment I got in my career."

RESULT: COTTO TKO 10

Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk and you can follow him on Twitter @AnsonWainwright.

A LEGEND IN PLAIN SIGHT

BOXING FOLKS HAVE KNOWN ABOUT **AMANDA SERRANO'S** TALENTS FOR A LONG TIME, AND THE REST OF THE WORLD IS NOW FINALLY CATCHING ON

By **Thomas Gerbasi**

INSET ABOVE: AL BELLO; ICON SPORTSWIRE

Serrano received some long-overdue recognition, thanks to her impressive stoppage of Daniela Bermudez (below).

It took 12 years, 39 wins, 29 knockouts and seven divisional world titles for Amanda Serrano to finally get the "big" fight she was searching for, and on a Thursday night in San Juan, Puerto Rico, this past March, the 32-year-old delivered, knocking out Daniela Bermudez in the ninth round.

Sounds simple enough, especially for a fighter long entrenched in the upper reaches of the pound-for-pound list, but the road to March 25, 2021, wasn't an easy one for the WBC/WBO featherweight titleholder, and even now, after proving she was just as good as the world thought she was, having arrived hasn't really set in for the Brooklynite.

"I still feel like I'm not as accomplished as people see me as," said Serrano. "I still live at home with my parents; I'm still a shy, timid girl that doesn't realize what I've accomplished and what I've done. I just can't wait until I retire after

accomplishing everything I wanted to, so I can look back and be like, 'Wow, oh my God, that was me.'"

That statement is almost hard to believe, given what Serrano has done in the boxing ring, but it's a testament to her belief that the work is never done, no matter how many accolades come with it. Case in point: Almost as soon as the dust settled from the win over Argentina's Bermudez, Serrano was told by manager/trainer Jordan Maldonado that her third pro mixed martial arts bout was scheduled for June 11 against Valentina Garcia.

"He wants me to be great. He wants me to leave a legacy and be a combat legend," said Serrano (40-1-1, 30 KOs) of Maldonado, who also happens to be her brother-in-law. "He wants me to do things that a lot of people are not able to do, and he wants to prove to people that we are capable of doing those things. So when he told me that we're gonna do an MMA fight, at first, I was like, 'eh,' but then I said, 'You know what? It's for a reason.' There's a method to his madness and it's worked so far, and now I'm just training hard to be the best at MMA. And then right after that, hopefully we can unify and have a great year."

If Serrano has her way, that next boxing match will be against WBA featherweight titleholder Erika Cruz Hernandez, who upset longtime champion Jelena Mrdjenovich in April. According to Maldonado and Serrano's promoter, Lou DiBella, there's no other fight to make right now than a unification clash between The Ring's No. 1 (Serrano) and No. 3-ranked (Cruz) 126-pounders.

"[Cruz is] a ruthless warrior," said Maldonado. "She's a very aggressive, come-forward fighter. So is Amanda. It's champion versus champion and it's Mexico versus Puerto Rico, so it has all the signs of a great fight."

"I got very clear marching orders from Amanda herself," added DiBella. "She said, 'I really need to unify this division; please make it happen for me.' So I've had many conversations with Erika's management and Erika, and Erika wants the opportunity and understands the magnitude of the fight, and her manager (Richard Borges) and I do have an agreement in principle done. We just don't have a date yet and a network."

One outlet that would love to be involved with a potential Serrano-Cruz bout is the relatively new kid on the block, Ring City USA. And while they don't have the budget of the DAZNs and Trillers of the world, they are making a mark for not only presenting competitive fights on the NBC Sports Network, but for championing women's boxing as well.

"We think there's a marketplace for women's boxing; there just is," said Evan Rutkowski, co-founder and Head of Boxing for Ring City USA. "That doesn't just mean you should put on a women's fight on an all-male card; you can make women's fights the main events. It doesn't need to be a gimmick where it's all women or something like that. If you have a fight worthy of it, that can be a main event and people will tune in and watch, and in a non-COVID world, people will buy tickets."

In March, Ring City USA was in Puerto Rico, and who better to headline an event than one of the island's favorite daughters, Serrano? Ironically, it was Cruz who was brought to the table first, but with the Mexico City native still relatively unknown pre-Mrdjenovich, Maldonado wanted a fight that was going to mean something for his sister-in-law, given the high-profile platform, and he was willing to abandon further financial negotiations to pit Serrano against three-division titleholder Bermudez.

"Cruz was 12-1, and people would find a way to criticize it," said Maldonado. "Daniela Bermudez, that fight was a dream come true. So I said, 'This one I'm gonna take it on the chin; I'll take the same money that was being offered for Erika Cruz. I'm not asking for a dollar more.' I needed that fight to make that statement, because after becoming undisputed champion, we're looking for that fight with (undisputed lightweight champion) Katie Taylor, and I want to mimic what Katie Taylor's doing. She's taking the big fights. I'm done taking fights that are meaningless. I want the big fights, I want the champions, and Lou abided by that and I'm grateful."

Austria's Eva Voraberger succumbs to a first-round knockout.

Ring City USA was grateful too, as it delivered a fight that garnered a lot of buzz before the opening bell as well as after Serrano's victory. So when a positive COVID-19 test scratched Jermaine Franklin from his April 22 bout against Stephen Shaw, Rutkowski had no problem elevating the matchup between Cruz and Mrdjenovich to the main event slot.

"By having a successful main event in March, we felt a hundred percent comfortable that when Franklin tested positive for COVID that Jelena versus Erika could be a main event for us," Rutkowski said. "And everything bore it out that that was the right move. We weren't under pressure to have a male main event, and you're definitely opening people up who wouldn't necessarily tune into weeknight boxing to tune into this. That's part of it. But I also just think that most hardcore boxing fans, if you match up the women correctly and if you promote it correctly and talk about it correctly – and when I say correctly, you say that this is gonna be a competitive fight and there's gonna be good action and it's gonna be an enjoyable watch on television – then people will respond, and they tune in. And that's what's happened."

Which brings us to Serrano-Cruz and a fight that could conceivably produce The Ring's first female featherweight champion, despite IBF champion Sarah Mahfoud sitting at the No. 2 spot in the rankings. Belt or no belt, though, Serrano is in a position to finally start reaping the rewards her talent and hard work have earned her.

And that's been a long time coming.

"Amanda should honestly have a big nest egg right now," said DiBella. "She doesn't because of when she came up in women's boxing. She wants to make the money, and she definitely wants to get paid fairly when she fights Katie Taylor and these big fights. But she's as much about legacy as anything else, which is the most important thing we can ask of any fighter."

Serrano's expertise extends beyond the field of boxing, as evidenced by her foray into MMA.

Before she stepped into the ring with Bermudez, Serrano had a place in the history books for her title-winning resume. But many of those wins came in fights for vacant titles, garnering her some criticism despite the fact that in those cases, champions gave up their belts to avoid the Puerto Rican power-puncher. And while the titles are nice, Serrano wanted the opportunity to test herself against the biggest names in the sport. In March, she finally got that shot and she rose to the occasion. Now she wants to unify and then get in the ring with Katie Taylor for a true superfight that fell by the wayside in 2020. Today, though, it's a more realistic possibility than ever.

"I really believe Amanda's the best female fighter on the planet right now, pound for pound," said DiBella. "And now at this point in her career, she doesn't want to be doing this at 37 or 38. She's 32 now. She wants to be out by 35, and she wants to become the first Puerto Rican fighter to fully unify a weight class with every belt, including the Ring belt. [Editor's note: Carlos Ortiz held the undisputed Ring/WBA/WBC lightweight championship before the IBF and WBO were formed.] That's why the Cruz fight is so important. [Serrano's] stature is growing clearly right now, and I think it will put her on more even ground to make a deal with Katie Taylor that I do think is inevitable. And frankly, I think that fight should be in front of the biggest crowd that's ever seen a women's bout. And that's the aim. I don't think there's a bigger fight than Katie Taylor and Amanda in women's boxing."

There isn't. And that's just the way Maldonado likes it, because from the start, he's wanted his sister-in-law to reach for the unreachable. Amanda Serrano has done just that.

"He's always taught me that if you want to be the best, you have to be the best in everything you do," said Serrano. "When I go run, run like a runner. When I lift weights, lift like a lifter. When I box, box like a boxer. I'm always in competition with myself, so I always want to be better than I was yesterday or the days before, and that really pushes me. And I always want to be better than my last fight, so hopefully the next fight you'll see that too."

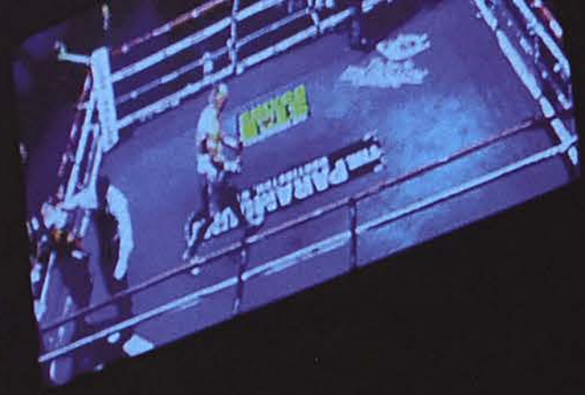
ROCKIN' THE HOUSE

THE PARAMOUNT IN HUNTINGTON, NEW YORK, HOME TO **JOE DEGUARDIA'S "ROCKIN' FIGHTS" CLUB SERIES**, HAS SPAWNED WORLD TITLEHOLDERS, LOCAL ATTRACTIONS AND WINNERS IN LIFE

By **Matthew M. Pomara**

Joe Smith Jr.'s road to a world title was winding and not without bumps. The hard-punching light heavyweight shocked the boxing world with knockout upsets over then-contender Andrzej Fonfara and living legend Bernard Hopkins in 2016, but his momentum stalled with decision losses to Sullivan Barrera in 2017 and to Dmitry Bivol in his first title shot in 2019.

However, the blue-collar slugger bounced back with a three-bout win streak that culminated in a majority decision over Maxim Vlasov to capture the WBO belt on April 10. He's come a long way from the New York City club circuit where his career began. And he isn't alone. The 31-year-



Cletus Seldin is one of many fighters who have thrived in the grassroots approach to boxing.

old Long Island native is the third alumnus from Rockin' Fights, the longest-running boxing series in New York, to capture a major world title.

Rockin' Fights has been the forge that helped make or shape club fighters, contenders, title challengers and now titleholders. It is the beginning for some, the apex for many, or a brief footnote in the careers of others. There are a select few who use it as the stepping stone to get to the top of the boxing mountain. For some boxers, it is simply the end of the line.

Smith, who grew up 30 miles from The Paramount where Rockin' Fights takes place, fought four times there with four bruising knockouts. It was the last stop before he rose to national prominence in 2016 with nationally televised victories over Fonfara and Hopkins. "It was great fighting in front of my hometown. [DeGuardia] had me fight the right fighters at the right time," Smith shared.

The series started in 2011 as an invention of necessity by DeGuardia, the President and CEO of Star Boxing. "There was nothing really on Long Island, no club shows," he said. "We needed a venue. Most of what I promoted was in the Bronx or the city of Yonkers.

"The stars had to align for something like this, and they did. The Paramount was a new venue (opening in 2011), there were no shows happening on Long Island and we were looking to build Chris (Algieri). Let's go build something here.

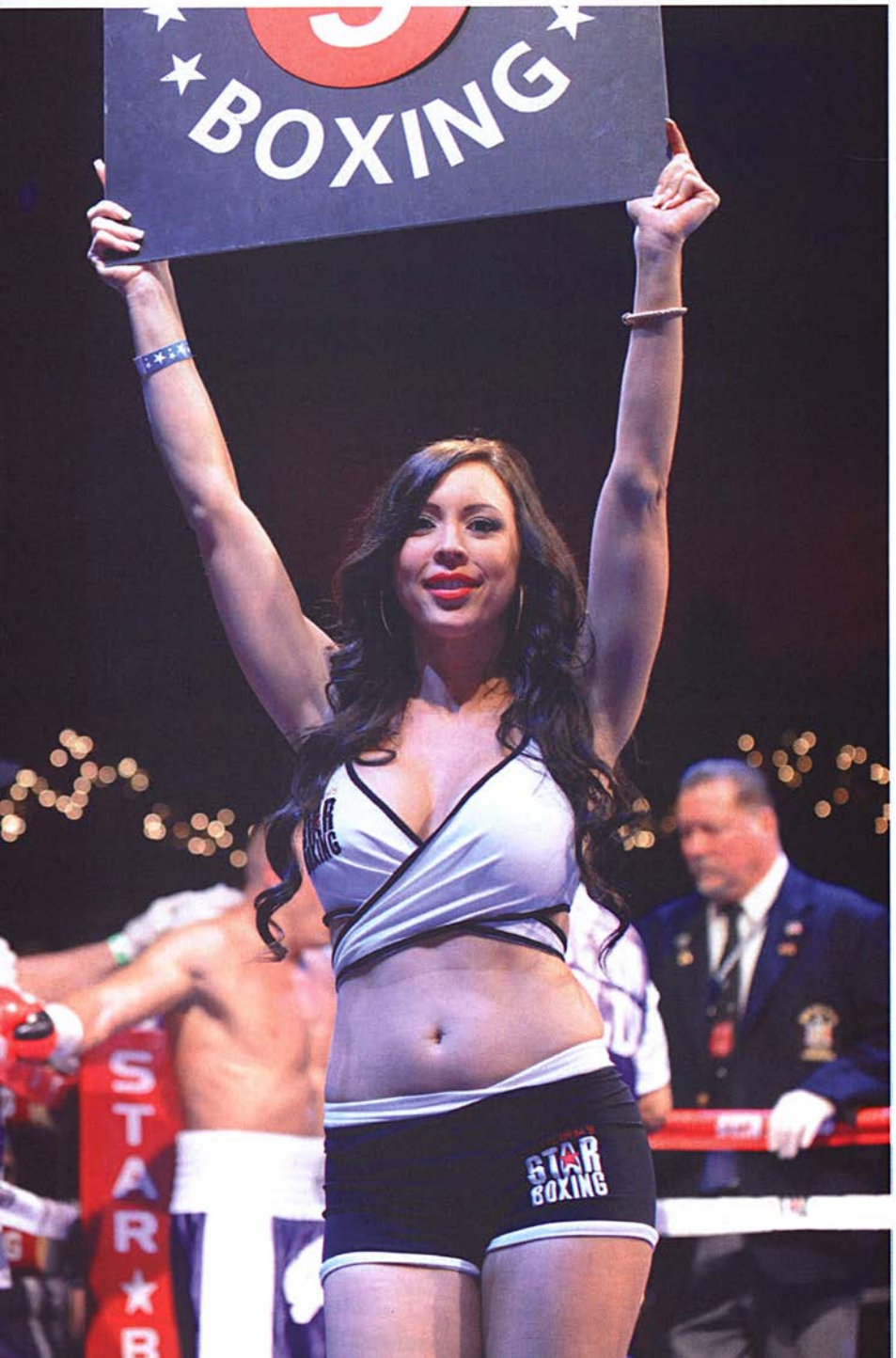
"We found The Paramount and I fell in love with the place. It was a good marriage; they were looking for exposure, we wanted to build a series. Over time we developed a great relationship."

What it developed into is a series of events that at last count has had 38 sellouts. "[We had] a vision of taking the old club fights but putting it in a modern venue without losing the feel. It was like the Blue Horizon, but modern and much cleaner," DeGuardia said.

The Paramount has since become a destination for performers such as Billy Joel, Ed Sheeran and Pitbull, but it still recognizes the importance of Rockin Fights on its website, calling itself "the hometown venue for Chris Algieri, 'The Pride of Huntington.'"

Former 140-pound titleholder Algieri was the headliner of the first Rockin' Fights, beating out gatekeeper Bayan Jargal in a rough, tough 10-round unanimous decision.

"The Paramount was such an important part of my development. I fought in front of my hometown on the streets I walked as a kid," said Algieri, who followed the Jargal bout with six consecutive victories at the venue, leading to an ESPN2-televised crossroads bout vs. fringe contender Emanuel Taylor in February 2014. "In the Emanuel Taylor fight, it was really my coming of age as a boxer ... It isn't just the boxing, which of course is key, it is the acoustics. There is a feeling like you are walking into



Rockin' Fights also helped put The Paramount on the map.

MIKEY WILLIAMS/TOP RANK INC VIA GETTY IMAGES

Joe Smith Jr. (with Joe DeGuardia on his right) went from Rockin' Fights to a light heavyweight world title.

hell. I was more relaxed walking into the Barclays (a 16,000-seat arena in Brooklyn) than The Paramount.

"The fans are on top of you. In bigger venues the crowds are faceless; at The Paramount, that is completely different. You see faces in the crowd."

Algieri headlined eight of his nine appearances, and when he was launching his 2018 comeback following a two-and-a-half-year hiatus from boxing, it started at Rockin' Fights 33, back at The Paramount. "It was right, it was the only thing to do, it just made sense," he said. "I told the owners of The Paramount that I wanted to come back at some point."

Algieri is the most successful graduate of the Rockin' Fights series. He notched nine wins at The Paramount, eight coming before his first world title shot. After beating Taylor in a close but decisive victory, Algieri took on "The Russian Rocky," Ruslan Provodnikov, on HBO. Despite suffering two knockdowns in a dramatic opening round, Algieri held on to beat Provodnikov via split decision to claim the WBO 140-pound belt at the aforementioned Barclays Center. Algieri parlayed that victory into an HBO PPV showdown with Manny Pacquiao in Macau.

The formula for Rockin' Fights' success is complicated in practice but straightforward in purpose: Give fighters a local platform that helps build their resume and creates an organic fanbase, then give them an opportunity to prove themselves in front of the boxing world.

"There is a lot that goes into it," shared DeGuardia. "You have to evaluate what kind of fights does [the fighter] need? You need to build confidence and character; that interplay is important. How do they interact with the whole team? We also need to make sure we are creating good fights that entertain and help in a development; you can't just have blowouts. It's a delicate balance."

One key member of DeGuardia's team is Tony Palmieri, who has no official title but plays a major role in the success of the series. Having started as an intern, he too developed through the series and now for all intents and purposes is the producer of Rockin' Fights. He works closely with the Paramount staff to make sure the show meets DeGuardia's standards. He also works with the commission, schedules the weigh-in and keeps the fighters on track the night of the bouts.

"It makes you feel purposeful. You see the opportunities and the guys who seize it and are successful," Palmieri explained. "It's cool to watch them grow and help them grow. They are here, then they are the feature bout on a major network."

Algieri helped provide the blueprint on how to succeed with that opportunity. "Very grass roots, I would do meet-and-greets locally to sell tickets," Algieri said. "The Paramount became me. I really took

to social media and I was always a good ticket-seller; I needed to be seen. It is a family-style fight club."

If Algieri is the most accomplished of Rockin' Fights' alumnus, Cletus Seldin, "The Hebrew Hammer," is the most colorful. He has fought at The Paramount 17 times, with 16 victories and 13 knockouts (one ended in a no-contest). Another throwback fighter like Smith, the venue fits him perfectly. Seldin used his success at Rockin' Fights to become only the third fighter in history to fight back-to-back months on HBO (Roy Jones Jr. and Mike Tyson were the other two).

He is a boxing character, growing a mullet and dying his hair purple for fights. He is quick to boast about having one of the biggest Funko Pop collections in the world. Make no mistake, though; he is a prizefighter in every sense of the word.

"The Paramount is my home field, my fights are called a Hammer Holiday, my fans are the Hamma Heads," Seldin said. "I was on the first-ever Rockin' Fights and I always put on a show. I bring excitement and entertainment to every card."

"Rockin' Fights just doesn't teach you about boxing, it teaches you how to do interviews, speak with the fans, build my boxing vocabulary, prepares you for moments," said Tyrone "Jackpot" James (11-0, 8 KOs), who currently headlines Rockin' Fights shows and looks to be DeGuardia's next breakout fighter.

"Long Island boxers are putting their name on the map ... The whole crowd is behind you and it is so loud. I feel great progressing through, and I will take over The Paramount now, be the king, and once I branch out, I will hand it to who is next on the list."

"I told Tyrone it's yours, you're the guy now. I have known him since he was a kid. It's good to see the next generation," Algieri said.

James might be the new king of The Paramount, but the last monarch isn't ready to cede the throne. Danny "El Gallo" Gonzalez is a junior welterweight fringe contender who once tipped the scales at 240 pounds, 100 over his fighting weight. He has battled 11 times at The Paramount, winning all his fights. His victory over local favorite Johnny "Hitman" Hernandez propelled him into a fight with Algieri at Madison Square Garden in January 2019.

"Idols become rivals. I am grateful to Chris, and fighting him was a great experience," said Gonzalez, who dropped a 10-round decision to Algieri but acquitted himself well. "The Paramount prepared me for MSG. You will laugh, but my fight with Johnny Hernandez was much louder and the energy was one of a kind.

"If it wasn't for The Paramount ... 11 fights, the right fights at the right time; the experience was legit and prepared me for the moment. It helped me build patience and calm focus ... It has given me great exposure."

Gonzalez returned to Rockin' Fights late in 2019 to pull out another hard-fought victory over Hernandez. "I would like to be the winningest fighter in Rockin' Fights history. I want to keep getting tested," Gonzalez shared.

Hernandez (10-5, 1 KO) is a good-looking Huntington native with a great personality. He currently has a record of 9-4 in Rockin' Fights appearances and is considering whether to continue his career after the two losses to Gonzalez. However, it seems as though he wants to give it one more shot.

"Rockin' Fights gives small-time guys an opportunity," Hernandez said. "I've watched stars rise out of there, and I am doing it in my own backyard. I want my legacy to be the impact I had on the fans who came to see me. I am proud of what I have done there."

Palmieri agreed with Hernandez and Gonzalez: "Of the fights I have been a part of, that was the loudest I have ever seen the crowd. They were our home-grown guys. That is

Daniel Gonzalez (right) was game in defeat against fellow Rockin' Fights graduate Chris Algieri.

what makes Rockin' Fights and Star Boxing special."

The series has created local attractions like Hernandez who are instrumental in selling out The Paramount. Some fighters' ring success did not lead to the world title picture but parlayed them into successful careers locally and eventually beyond the ring.

Anthony "Showtime" Karperis is tied with Seldin for the most appearances in the Rockin' Fight Series at 17. Karperis won several regional titles and never failed to impress the local crowds in compiling a 13-3 record.

"I gave Karperis the main event because he embodied the spirit of the series. He showed he could take the spot," DeGuardia said of Karperis, who headlined four shows.

"I started as the opener and worked my way through," Karperis said. "I am proud that I helped build that house."

After a hand injury nixed a bout with Danny Gonzalez, Karperis ended his boxing career in 2018. He now sells medical equipment. "Boxing definitely gave me confidence," Karperis said.

However, he hasn't strayed too far from the ring. Karperis now serves as the chief second to Hernandez. "It's very cool and nice to see the other side of the business, and it keeps me relevant," he said.

The Paramount meant so much to Karperis that he proposed to his fiancée, Kristen, under the marquee, which helped him pop the question (which was posted on it). She said yes.

While the Gonzalez bout was one that got away, one of Karperis' career highlights was winning the New York State junior welterweight title from another Star Boxing fighter, Alan Gotay.

Gotay's career journey is also intertwined with Rockin' Fights. "I saw Chris Algieri there and I knew I wanted to fight there ... I saw myself in Chris. Rockin' Fights and Chris gave Long Island fighters a platform to compete," Gotay said.

Seldin and his enthusiastic fans are hoping for a world title opportunity at junior welterweight.

He got to 8-0, and then his career hit the proverbial wall. After eight victories, seven of which came at The Paramount, he lost a first-round technical knockout. After the defeat, he went to culinary school, becoming the top chef in his class.

Two more losses later, including the hard-fought loss to Karperis, Gotay left the ring and headed to the kitchen. He used his brief brush with fame to open a Cuban Eatery, Babalu, in the shadow of The Paramount. "Boxing made me who I am. I am doing what I am supposed to be doing," he said.

Recognizable names that have fought in the Rockin' Fights series include current WBO middleweight titleholder Demetrius Andrade, heavyweight title challenger Carlos Takam and heavyweight trial horse Vinny Maddalone, who fought Evander Holyfield and Tyson Fury. Maddalone finished his career at The Paramount. As for Joe Smith (27-3, 21 KOs), he is now in position to challenge WBC/IBF titleholder Artur Beterbiev in a high-profile unification showdown.

DeGuardia didn't just use the platform to develop the boxers; the platform itself developed. "I was focused on building the series, not just the guys," said DeGuardia. "You can't sustain just on the fighter's fans; you need to build new fans. We have done that."

You can debate who will be the next standout to emerge from Rockin' Fights, but DeGuardia is truly the "King of The Paramount." He bristles at the title but shares what every fighter feels: "It's my home."

"There is something in every card that I am proud of," he said. "There are so many memories, from the July 28, 2012, show (the night DeGuardia was in a near fatal car accident), to the first event to the last event, which was tremendous. All those things were special to me."

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the series' future would seem somewhat hazy, but it isn't to DeGuardia.

"Oh, we are continuing the series. I have already locked in dates with The Paramount ... As soon as New York allows it, we will be there. I anticipate big, big nights ahead," he said.

"It's rewarding to develop and build the success in and out of the ring. I am so proud of what my guys have done outside of the ring, not just in the ring. It makes it all worthwhile."

BACK FROM THE BRINK

WHETHER **CHRIS BYRD'S** RETURN TO BOXING HAPPENS OR NOT, THE FACT THAT IT'S EVEN POSSIBLE IS PROOF THAT HE ALREADY WON THE FIGHT OF HIS LIFE

By **Joseph Santoliquito**

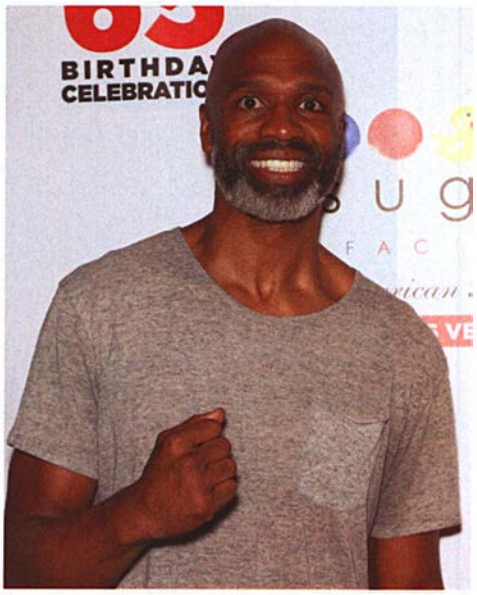
The park hummed only with the doleful cry of a desperate man swaying gently on a swing. That's where Laurie Byrd found her baby brother, Chris, the two-time heavyweight titlist, a few blocks from his house one April night in 2017. Chris' face was a ghoulish mask, his bloodshot eyes bigger than coffee saucers in the twilight.

Laurie stood at the park's edge for a moment wondering what monster had possessed her brother, once a lovable, hyper kid with a beaming smile who would follow her to basketball practice. Chris was wondering, too. His mind was twisted and he didn't know what to do next. Drown himself in the Pacific Ocean? Hang himself from a balcony for the neighborhood to see? Stuff his mouth with pills and never wake up?

During a 16-year, 47-fight pro career, the undersized Chris Byrd faced some of the most formidable heavyweights of his era, including David Tua, Evander Holyfield, Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko and Ike Ibeabuchi, gorging himself and trashing his body to barely get over 210 pounds.

But for close to a decade after his final fight, Byrd was faced with a battle more daunting than any presented by those big punchers.

"Rapid Fire" Chris Byrd won two heavyweight world titles despite being a natural middleweight.



Amazingly, Byrd, 50, insists that he can compete at 160 pounds.

His clash came against the horrors of anxiety, depression and despair – constant agony that shoved him to the brink of suicide.

If not for Laurie interceding that spring night in 2017 and a handful of others who came to Byrd's rescue, this would be a far more somber story.

Byrd, a middleweight silver medalist at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, defied logic as a heavyweight in the pro ranks, where he would routinely battle opponents who were larger than he was – often by a wide margin.

Now Byrd, who will turn 51 on August 15, is thinking about returning to the ring for the first time in 12 years. He says it's to make up for what he missed during his prime, a real chance to show what he can do at his more natural weight of 160. He says he's a changed man from the walking Halloween costume he wore for many years, enduring the relentless throbbing in his feet, back, hips, shoulders and knees.

He almost lost his family over it. He almost lost who he is. He almost lost his life.

To outsiders, Chris and his wife, Tracy, lived an idyllic life. They were the perfect boxing couple, as close to a modern version of the Beaver Cleaver TV family as there can be in boxing. Their three children – Jordan, Justin and Sydney – quite literally grew up before the boxing community's eyes. They seemed well-adjusted; they were a joy to be around. Hardly anyone uttered a sordid word or had a negative attitude when it came to Chris Byrd.

It's why Byrd's post-boxing career, at least the first incarnation of it, seems so difficult to fathom.

"Everybody in boxing loved Chris Byrd. And you would meet Chris and Tracy, and who could not love them?" said Steve Cunningham, the two-time IBF cruiserweight titlist. "They named our daughter, Kennedy. We're that close to the Byrds. Chris is the easiest guy to get along with, a nonhostile guy, except when you're in the ring with him.

"Chris always had it together. My wife and I always looked at Chris and Tracy as our big brother and sister. I love Chris Byrd. When people ask me who my favorite all-time boxer is, I don't say Muhammad Ali; I don't say Sugar Ray Leonard. I say Chris Byrd, because I was in four or five training camps with him. I knew the odds were against him on the business side and the size side. I

HENNY RAY ABRAMS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; (RIGHT) GABE GINSBERB

Byrd gave away almost 30 pounds in his TKO loss to Wladimir Klitschko.

understand what he was up against – and he still went on to become a two-time heavyweight champion."

Chris Byrd's pain first started in 2009 in his left pinky toe. It was just a light tingling sensation. At first, Byrd (41-5-1, 22 knockouts) ignored it, but as it continued to worsen and started to spread, his personable disposition grew dark. Byrd's last fight was a victory, a four-round knockout over the terribly overmatched Matthias Sandow in Germany on March 21, 2009.

After that, the gifted southpaw became a trainer, following the same path as his parents, Joe and Rose Byrd, who trained their eight children in their fabled "dungeon" in the basement of the Byrd home in Flint, Michigan, the incubator of Chris' awkward, slick style.

By 2010, the pain had spread. Chris couldn't sleep for more than two or three hours at a time. Doctors tried to find answers. Chris was diagnosed with peripheral neuropathy, a sometimes excruciating condition caused by nerve damage.

Chris was prescribed numerous anti-inflammatory medications. But the pills had awful side effects, which came to a head in June 2010 when Chris went to see a basketball game in which his sister Laurie was coaching in Los Angeles. Chris went to the game with Tracy, his son Justin and his nephew. After the game, as the family was walking to their car in the parking lot, Tracy mentioned Justin had said something disrespectful to her. The boys were teenagers at the time.

"When we got in the car, I lost it on my son and nephew," Chris recalled. "I remember screaming at them and wanting to fight them. I was going crazy. I went into a rage. I got out of the car and challenged my son and my nephew to fight. Someone saw this and called the cops. Tracy was trying to tell me to stop. My son and nephew wouldn't get out of the car, they were so scared. I was circling the car yelling and going crazy.

"I was able to calm myself down when I realized I was acting nuts. I got back in the car. Everything calmed down, but everyone was looking at me like I was crazy. We started driving out of the parking lot and immediately cop cars were driving towards me and behind me, blocking me in."

There were six police cruisers. Chris stopped the car. The police jumped out, guns drawn, and told the family to get out of the car and hit the ground. Chris and his family complied. After being handcuffed and interrogated, the police allowed Chris' family to go without any charges.

This, however, convinced Tracy that something was wrong with Chris. His doctor immediately took him off the medication.

"I started having issues in my hips and both shoulders, and the neuropathy spread all the way up my leg," Chris recalled. "I could not take the pain any longer. I was no longer sleeping at night. I was starting to feel a little better with the drugs, but then I started to have outbursts. I would lose my temper.

"I finally told Tracy about all of the thoughts I was having. I would have dreams of killing myself, Tracy, my entire family in their sleep. One night, I had a dream of hanging myself from my balcony, naked, so the whole neighborhood could see me. I was so aware these thoughts were not normal. I was so scared of these thoughts. They were so real and so vivid, but I was too scared to tell anyone, because I thought everyone would think I was crazy."

By August 2010, his family did.

"Chris became someone different, someone I didn't know," recalled Tracy, crying. "I still love him. That will never change. He's always going to be the love of my life. His pain started small and gradually got worse, and worse, and worse. I spent years taking Chris to doctors, begging anyone for help. It reached a point where it became too much for him. It was hell. Chris sucked it up. We were still a family. We did things together. Everyone knew Chris was in pain, and during that time it pained me seeing Chris that way. We had a great marriage that everyone saw. My kids had the best dad, and I had the best husband.

"The pain started and that changed everything."

Chris spent the summer of 2010 in his bedroom. He was severely depressed and did not see the point of living anymore. Justin was so worried about him that he spent the summer with his father, watching TV. The only time Justin left his side was when Tracy came to bed, or to get his father food.

The rage and thoughts of suicide subsided for a time, though the pain continued to worsen. It reached another crescendo in 2017. Tracy hid anything that Chris could grab to possibly harm himself, like knives and medication.

One weekday morning in April 2017, Chris got up from another bad night.

"That morning I woke up from the pain and I couldn't take it anymore; all I wanted to do was take some pills and go to sleep for good," he remembered. "I used to sit in my garage all day and not talk to anyone. I remember telling Tracy that I wanted to end it all. For me, life was over. No one was able to help me. I couldn't take medication because of my mental state. This was the eighth or ninth time I went through this. My family was used to it.

"But this outburst was worse than the others. I was in pain everywhere. When you're in real pain, you don't think right. It's when it got super serious. I would say that it was the closest I ever came to doing something. I wanted to walk into the ocean, and when I thought I would float back to the shore, I didn't want my family to see me that way. I remember sitting on the ledge in my backyard, and I wanted to leave the house.

"My family tried to grab me and I threw them off me. I would go crazy. It would be like blacking out. I had been going to doctors every day, and I had enough. When I finally broke, I broke. It led to that."

Chris walked through the front gate with tears streaming down his face. Drunk on emotion, his ungainly stroll led him to a local park a few blocks away. Laurie followed from a distance. When Chris sat on the swing, Laurie approached him to see if he was OK. Chris sneered at her, warning her away.

Chris kept repeating, "I want to kill myself; I want to cut off my foot; I don't want to live anymore."

"The pain was so unbearable, and I kept telling him that I couldn't understand what he was going through; it was like Chris was possessed," recalled Laurie. "I looked at Chris and it was like I didn't know this person.

"I was scared of him because I didn't know what he was going to do, but I was there to protect him, too. To see him go through that broke my heart. I talked to him and I told him, 'Momma wouldn't want to see you like this.' That calmed him down. (Rose passed away in June 2015.)

"It was like an angel came down and landed on his shoulder. He calmed down. He said, 'You're right. She wouldn't.'"

The pair started laughing and everything went silent. They eased back up, brother and sister, and walked to the house. It seemed like a lifetime to get there, with Chris repeatedly saying, "I'm good, I'm good."

"That's the closest I came to actually doing something extreme. Then a million thoughts go through your head that you can't do it," Chris

TOMSTEN SUEZ

said. "It hit me that those committed to suicide are committed to doing it. I thought about how many people I would hurt. I was never committed to doing it. I didn't want to cause my family any pain. That's what saved me. I second-guessed myself the whole time."

Four months later, a chance meeting changed everything.

What Chris Byrd experienced is very much like what many retired NFL veterans go through, living with omnipresent pain. He was dealing with 11 years of no sleep while in constant agony. He was growing psychotic.

Today, Byrd says he is in a good, lucid state of mind.

That journey to recovery began in August 2017 while among a group of people discussing the medicinal benefits of cannabidiol (CBD), one of the many chemical compounds found in marijuana. But unlike THC, marijuana's main psychoactive component, CBD has no intoxicating effect.

This is where Chris met Tammie Thomas, a cannabis consultant. She didn't know anything about Byrd but felt instant compassion when Chris shuffled up as the last speaker of the meeting. His feet didn't spread more than 12 inches apart as he walked to the front of the group.

Within seconds, Chris was sobbing.

"I couldn't believe that they had Chris speaking," Thomas remembered. "He was announced as a former two-time heavyweight champion. This guy? A former two-time heavyweight champion? My heart hurt for him.

"Afterward, I knew Chris was going to be bombarded with people, so I passed along my number to him. Chris told me he suffered from neuropathy, which destroys your nerves. It's very hard to combat and hard to treat. I told Chris I knew I could help him, and Chris was shocked, because for 11 years he had gone to every doctor he could to deal with the pain."

Byrd waited a week to call Thomas and asked her for a home consultation. His entire family, who had grown frustrated with Chris' behavior, would be on hand to listen to Thomas talk about the therapeutic benefits of cannabis.

Thomas noticed something about the Byrd family as she spoke to them. In her opinion, they were done with him.

"Chris couldn't finish a sentence without his family answering for him," she said. "I asked Chris what he was going through, and his family just cut him off. They treated him like a washed-up fighter that they put in the corner. I remember being with Chris alone in his kitchen as he was making his smoothie, and he looked at me and said he wanted to start boxing again.

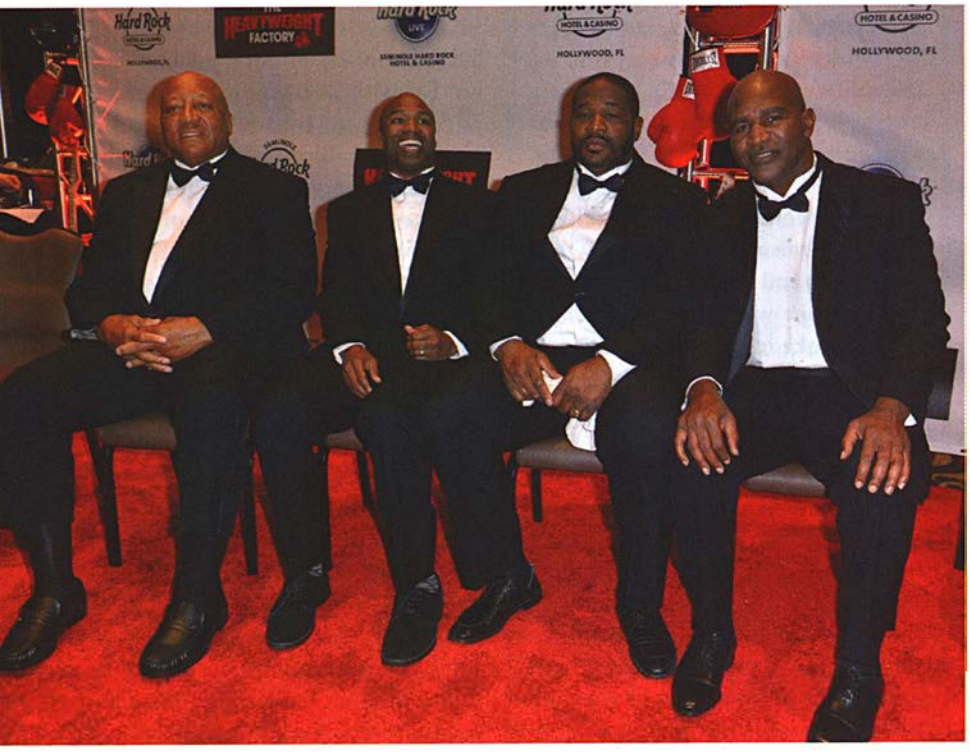
"He had this look that no matter what anyone thought, he was going to fight. I remember leaving the house that day thinking he had no support and no one believed in him. I thought about it again that night and [how] if he had one person to believe in him, he was going to be able to do it. Chris was ready to check out. Chris did put his family through some hell, too, but there were people who did give up on Chris."

From Tracy's perspective, she was protecting Chris from himself.

"I didn't and don't want to see Chris fight again, and I would do anything to this day to protect him," Tracy said. "I still care about Chris. I would consider myself blessed to love again the way I loved Chris. No one ever checked out on Chris.

It was torture for me and torture for the kids. I finished Chris' sentences – but I did that the whole time Chris and I were together. I fought for him for 12 years, and I checked out when he started getting involved with these new people in his life and Chris wanted to fight again.

"Chris' family still supports and loves him. No one wants to see Chris get hurt. I stayed, and I stayed, and I stayed. This wasn't Chris Byrd, the underdog guy boxing loved. I checked out when it reached a point of no return. He was set in his mind that he was going to fight again. He's completely different. But it will kill



He may have been small, but Byrd could always hang with the heavyweights.

me to ever see Chris get hurt. I would die for him."

Thomas told the Byrds that if you took the whole cannabis plant from the ground and used it raw, it's proven to have strong medicinal purposes – though only in high doses.

"If people think they can smoke a joint and it's going to cure all of their ailments, it's the farthest thing from the truth. It's a pain pill; it's temporary; it's a band-aid," Thomas said. "When the high wears off, you're back in pain again. The first two, three months with Chris, he was on 1,500 to 3,000 milligrams a day, drinking it and doing suppositories.

"Those were our two primary methods of delivery. When you do it through the rectum, you don't get high, because it bypasses the liver. When you inhale, ingest or smoke cannabis with THC, it processes through the liver, which converts it into a psychoactive compound. By doing suppositories, that's avoided."

Three years after they met, Byrd has been relatively pain-free.

"Once Chris' body was healed, he is probably doing about 100 milligrams a day as maintenance to control inflammation, not because he needs anything healed," Thomas said.

Another cathartic moment occurred in 2018, while on a speaking engagement in Yuma, Arizona, with Chris' cousin, former WBO heavyweight titlist Lamon Brewster. Now 47 and mentoring at-risk children in Indianapolis, Indiana, Brewster was with Byrd during a massage therapy session.

The masseuse struck a nerve in Byrd's left ankle and he exploded in agony. Brewster could feel the emotion from across the room.

"And it was good, because we're fighters and we make a living hiding our pain," Brewster said. "We're programmed to do that. Fighters go through life thinking it's only us who go through pain. It can create mental illness. Chris sat up and slammed his first down on the mat. He said, 'I can't do it. I can't deal with this for the rest of my life.'

"The one thing about being a champion is we're normally by ourselves a lot. When you're alone like that and you're in pain, there is no one you can express that to and explain what you're feeling. I never saw Chris like that before. It caught me totally off guard; I didn't try to calm him down. What he was going through I would put no one on earth through.

"I kept encouraging him to talk more. I wanted him to get it all out. If the river is overflowing, you don't try to stop it. I kept telling him, 'Let it out! Let it out, cousin!' Chris had to get it out. That was his crossroad. His mind snapped back. I understood his pain, because my pain drove me half-crazy. People don't know what pain can do to you mentally, not just physically."

Laurie was once fearful that she might get that call in the early hours of the morning about Chris, afraid one of his outbursts would be in public and he would wind up in jail. Her concerns have since been allayed.

Byrd hopes that his road to recovery may lead back to the ring, although whether any state athletic commission would allow it, given what he's been through, is a fair question and a story for another day.

He has aspirations to box exhibitions with Mike Tyson's Legends Only League.

Redemption, though, did not come without potholes. There has been collateral damage. Byrd is on disability, much of his boxing earnings dissipated by his medical care.

As a result of his ordeal, Byrd (with wife Tracy and son Justin) would see family bonds stretched to the breaking point.

And there is more.

"Tracy and I are separated on our way to divorce," said Chris, who was set to launch his own cannabis company called Healthy Byrd. "Tracy and I have a relationship. Me and my children are cool. They're grown now. I realize the hell that I put them through. I could step outside myself and see what I was going through, but I will say this: They didn't know what I was going through.

"I was in so much pain. I asked the doctor to cut my left foot off. I lost so much time because of all of the pain I was in. I promised myself once I got through the pain, I would come back to boxing [as a] middleweight. I proved everyone wrong the first time when I became heavyweight champion. I'll shock the world again. I can look at myself in the mirror and I can say, 'I made it. I made it.'" RING

Joseph Santoliquito is an award-winning sportswriter who has been working for Ring Magazine/RingTV.com since October 1997 and is the president of the Boxing Writers Association of America. He can be followed on Twitter @JSantoliquito.

THE PRICE THEY PAY

CELEBRATED WARRIORS LIKE **MICKY WARD** CREATE LASTING LEGACIES WITH THE VALOR THEY REPEATEDLY EXHIBIT IN THE RING, BUT WHAT'S THE ULTIMATE COST TO THE FIGHTER?

By **Tris Dixon**

The Ward of today (above, in 2019) is living with the effects of his many ring wars.

Micky Ward is a hero. He was a blue-collar warrior who worked paving roads by day and then went into the trenches and fought by night.

He had two careers, going from prospect to gatekeeper the first time around from 1985 to 1991 before he gave it another try, becoming a contender and fan favorite the second time around between 1995 and 2003.

There were any number of wars during that second run, climaxing with three exceptional and violent tussles with friend and rival Arturo Gatti that will be replayed 100 years from now.

Micky, whose life is so colourful that Mark Wahlberg played him in the biographical film The Fighter, is now 55 and is left counting the cost of his career having been diagnosed with CTE [chronic traumatic encephalopathy]. He's learned about the price he's paid, and while he wouldn't change a thing, he has agreed to leave his brain and part of his spinal cord behind for research so he can help scientists learn about what boxing has done to him while fight fans will always remain grateful to him for what he's done for boxing.

The following excerpt is from my book *Damage: The Untold Story of Brain Trauma in Boxing.* »

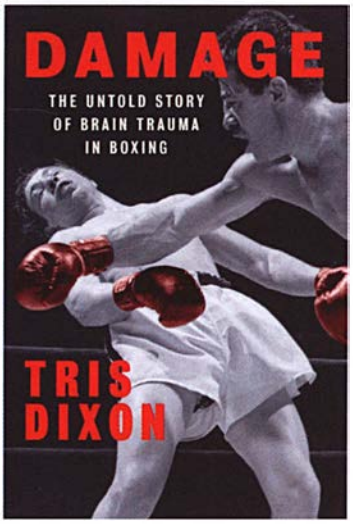
Cuts are often the immediate consequences of prizefights, but what about the damage on the inside?

Ward, a hugely popular figure in his community, throws out the ceremonial first pitch for the Boston Red Sox in 2011.

"I have my days," Micky Ward groaned.

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes momentarily rolling as he was asked to describe his symptoms. Ward, from Lowell, Massachusetts, is one of boxing's modern-day gladiators. He took part in a succession of Fight of the Year candidates in his long career, often drawing the crowd to its feet by dropping his hands and swinging for the fences trying to out-tough an opponent.

His strategy frequently worked, but it came at a cost. The 53-year-old does not slur his words. He does not shuffle when he walks. In fact, he can still turn in a decent 5k time. But he knows he has not come through the wars unscathed, and he has been told that, too. He was the straight-ahead gunslinger Harrison Martland (noted American pathologist who helped shape the field of neurotrauma), MacDonald Critchley (famed British neurologist) and the others warned would get damaged.



"There are some things, like my memory," he said. "Long term, I could tell you first-grade things I remember. I couldn't tell you yesterday, some things like that. Some things I can't really see, but my wife tells me. If I don't take my medicine, I get snappy. I get edgy and I didn't have that years ago. I'm very sharp-tempered if I don't take it. She will say to me, 'Did you take your medicine today?' and that's what I hate. If I've forgotten to take it and she can tell. And I'll snap, 'Yeah I took the medicine,' and then I'll go and take it."

He laughed at the lack of domestic bliss he inflicts upon his wife, Charlene, who has been by his side for almost two decades. She has seen a lot, including the bloodthirsty battles with Arturo Gatti that put an exclamation mark on his brutal career. But there were so many fights, so many stories, so many wars that the Gatti trilogy did not even get a mention in the movie of Micky's story, titled The Fighter, which is based on Ward's life and stars Mark Wahlberg in the lead role. The film saw Christian Bale score an Oscar

for his portrayal of Ward's troubled brother, Dicky Eklund.

As Micky's exciting career wound down, Chris Nowinski approached him from the Concussion Legacy Foundation and Ward underwent physical and neurological tests with Dr. Robert Cantu in Boston in 2005. "He (Nowinski) knew I was a fighter and he watched my fights, and I believe he was a boxing fan. He's a great guy, a sports guy, played football at Harvard, he's a smart kid, he loves sport and he cares about people. And with me retiring from fighting and him probably knowing how many times I got hit, I guess he spoke to Dr. Cantu and said, 'Let's see if he has it (chronic traumatic encephalopathy symptoms).' I took numerous tests, a lot of them, and it came back that I do."

It is unlikely Ward will get better from here on out. The question is: How much worse will he become? "Now they can't tell how bad you have it until you're dead and then they can go inside and look at your head and your brain," Ward added. "That's why I've donated my brain and part of my spine, so they can look at the effects of concussion."

While he acknowledged the condition, he purposefully does not dwell on it. He is aware of what it may mean for Charlene and his daughter, Kasie. He knows it is something they will inevitably have to face together.

"No, I'm not scared," he snapped when asked. Then he paused and thought about it a little longer. "I'm not really joking about it, but I can't take it too seriously. So I am and I ain't. It is what it is. That's why I try to stay healthy, work out, and try to stay busy, because once you go off the deep end and you're doing drink and drugs, you know, it's going to get worse and – boom. I don't want to do that. I basically want to stay as I am."

Then he goes on a roller coaster of memories, of hard fights and sometimes harder sparring sessions. He thought nothing of punishing brawls, biting down on his mouthpiece and fighting fire with fire. It's what he did, in the gym and in the prize ring. It's what secured his legacy in the hearts of a generation of fight fans. He symbolized a pure fighting integrity that cannot be coached, taught or paid for.

Ward alongside author Tris Dixon.

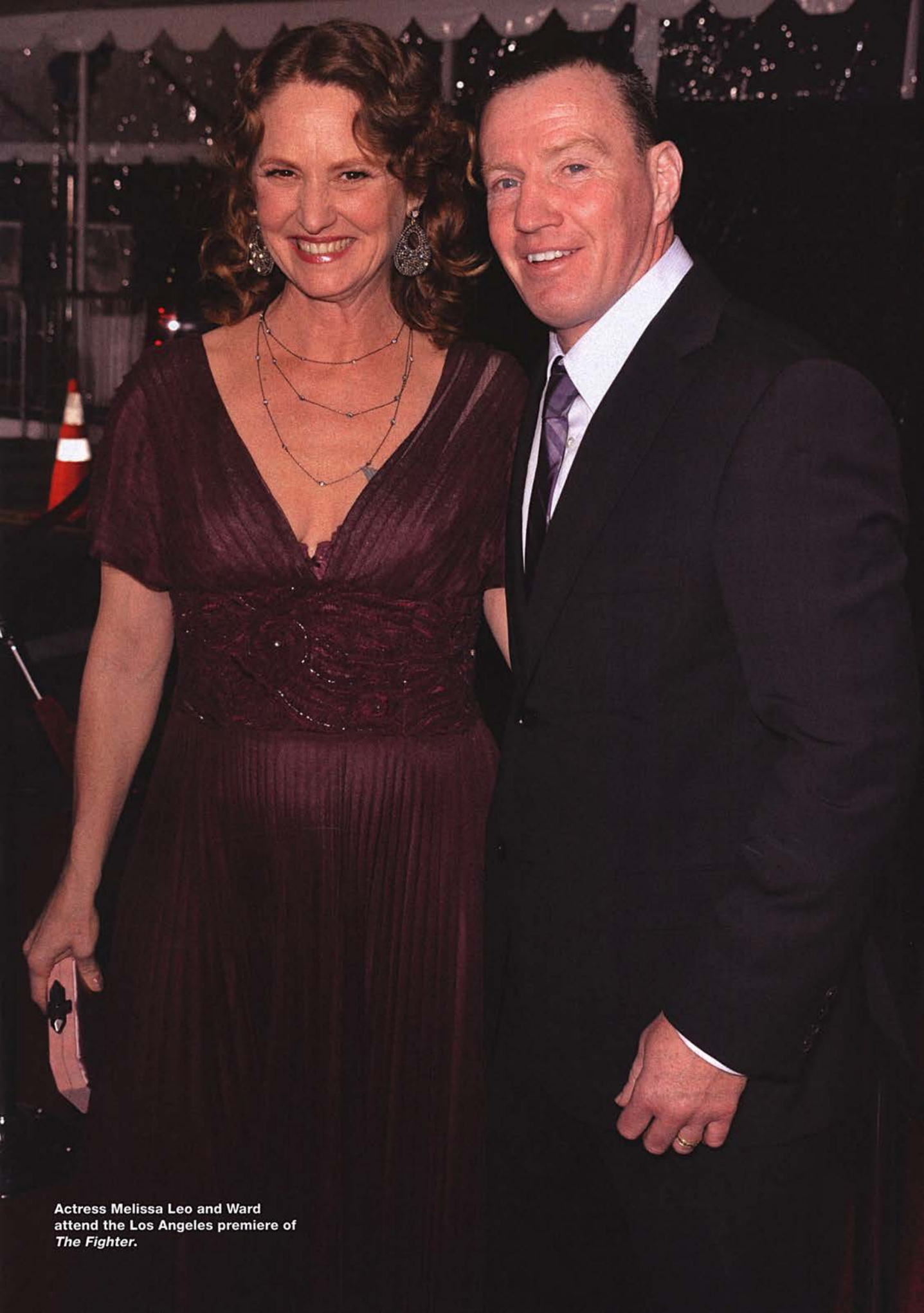
But it is why he finds himself where he is today, and why he is arming himself with as much knowledge about CTE as he prepares for his future. You would think if he could do things differently, he would, and perhaps the grueling training wars would be minimized.

He has his own theories now, but he didn't know any better back then. It was fight or spar regardless. Now he would not be so hasty. "Everybody's concussions are different," he continued. "Some people suffer from headaches. Some people suffer from depression. Some people get tired. Some people get angry. Some people want to hurt you. Some people want to hurt themselves. ... Everybody's symptoms are different."

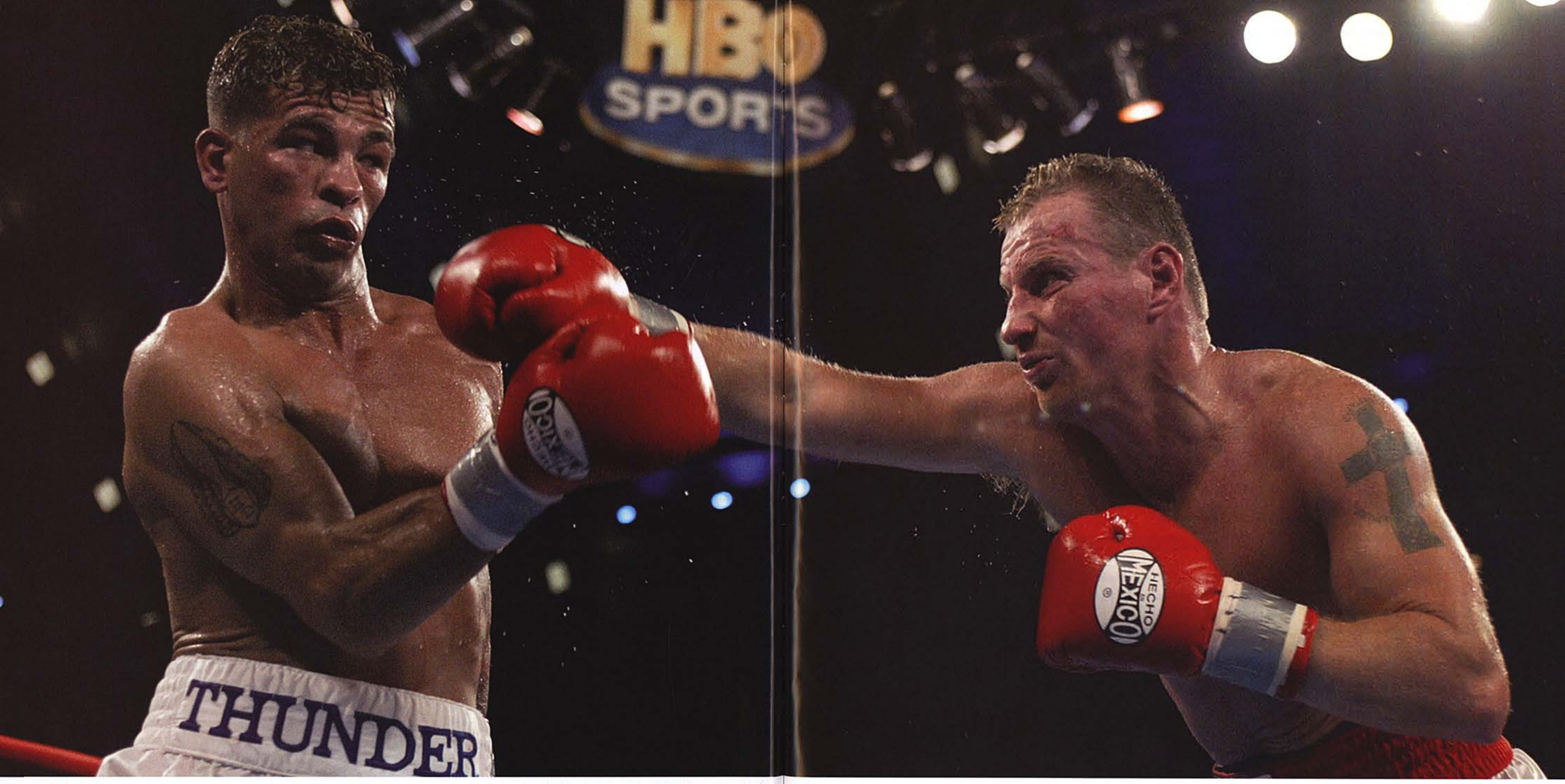
Ward admits he's boxed and trained while suffering with head injuries and probably concussions. "You're not going to say you can't spar," he tried to rationalize. "They're going to say, 'You're a pussy. You're this or you're that. Stop being a baby.' I would go and spar sometimes with the worst headaches, but I was too proud. I didn't want to show pain or weakness. I was determined and I didn't want anyone to think any less of me."

What would he have done differently? "I think in the gym I would have mentioned it more," he confessed. "People ask me if I'd have fought any different. No. That was just me. The thing about it is there's no way they can stop concussions in boxing. The only thing you can do is probably minimize the sparring. I used to like to spar hard. You know what I mean? Because in my mind if I didn't get used to getting dazed, then when you get hit in a fight – boom – you don't know what to do. I used not to like it, but I wanted to get that zing because I would know how to react and I wouldn't be hurt. Some fighters, they pussyfoot around sparring and then they get hit in a fight and they're like, 'Whoa.'"

When asked why damage in the aftermath of boxing was not talked about much in the sport, he was unsure, but he thought it should be discussed. "It's real, it's happening," Ward said. "You can't deny it, because it's proven with what it's done to fighters, to football players, to soccer players, to wrestlers ... People, because of money, want to turn the other cheek, but it's happening in sports right down to soccer where sometimes people are heading that ball at 70 miles per hour



Actress Melissa Leo and Ward attend the Los Angeles premiere of *The Fighter*.



in the pros. But it starts with being a kid. What I believe, and I don't know this for sure, but three minors (head injuries) is a major. Just getting stunned in the gym with a right hand or whatever, not hurt, just stunned, that's a minor. I used to get those constantly. I don't know how many of those I had. Full-blown I had a whole bunch, but the minors are the ones that you don't think hurt, but they still do damage. Then you're going back and sparring again. And again."

And again and again. Day in, day out. Fighters punch in at their office and they punch out. And then comes the fight. Boxers rarely enter the ring 100 percent, even though they are supposed to have trained for a peak. They may have suffered injuries or issues in camp, they may be going through personal problems away from the ring, they might have the flu, they could be weight-drained. Anything. But they still do everything they can to hear the first bell. And when that sounds, they do everything they can to hear the final bell, unless they can get rid of someone beforehand.

Ward, whose blistering left hook to the body – rather than punches to the head – curtailed many a bout, was a tough man. Arguably too tough. In a two-part career, he went from prospect to gatekeeper. Then, after a layoff, he returned as a veteran and a contender. Regardless of what period you look at, he took a lot of abuse. He lost all seven rounds against Alfonso Sanchez before miraculously turning it around with a single body shot to finish the fight. Outweighed drastically by Mike Mungin, he somehow went the distance. Then, after violent seesaw battles with Shea Neary and Emanuel Augustus, he went to war three times with Gatti. Their first fight is often referred to as the best fight ever – in any era or weight class. Ward won that on points over 10 rounds, but Gatti started the rematch sharply, caught Ward with a shot around his ear that caused him to pitch into the corner turnbuckle in round three, and that was all Ward recalled for the rest of the night, but he boxed on for a further seven rounds – making it predictably brutal for Gatti, too.

"I don't really remember it," he said. "I just knew I was in a fight. I knew at the time I was in a fight, but I can't really remember it. It was just instinct. Maybe that was because I'd sparred so hard, I was ready for it, and I was in such good shape that I was on autopilot."

Ward was not right for as long as two months after that fight, and then they fought a decider. Again it was ferocious. The two friends ripped into one another. Gatti broke his hand on Ward's hip. Ward floored Gatti with a huge right hand. After 10 rounds and a few embraces in the ring post-fight, they wound up in beds next to one another in the hospital, laughing about their shared wars.

Ward and Arturo Gatti became friends after an unforgettable and brutal trilogy.

"Damage: The Untold Story of Brain Trauma in Boxing" *is published by Hamilcar Publications and is available now at Amazon, Amazon UK and Barnes & Noble.*

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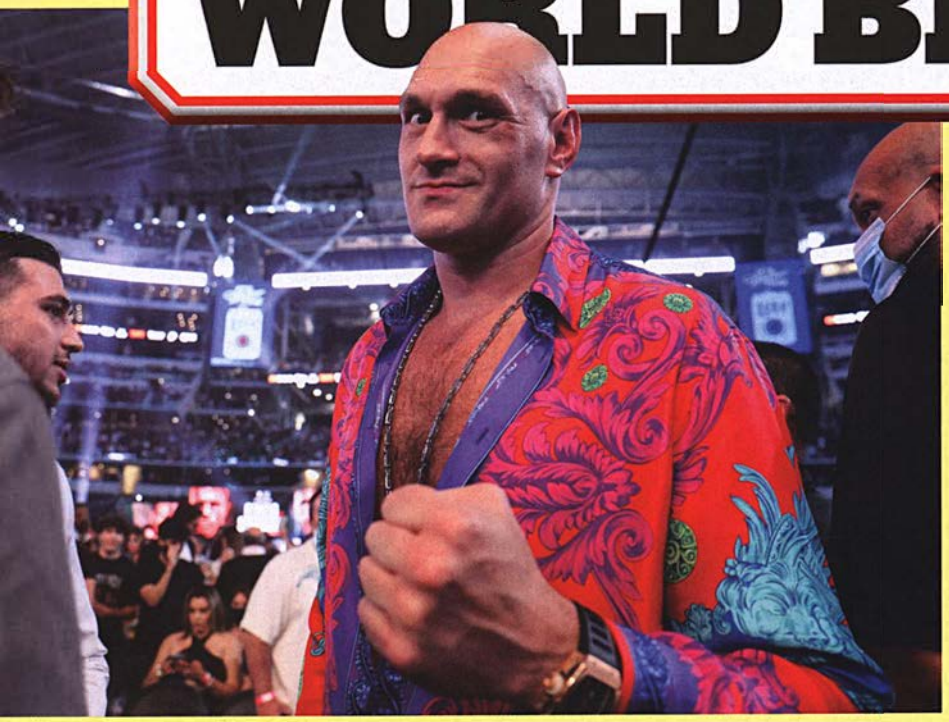


U.K.

BY GARETH A DAVIES

THE BIG TEASE CONTINUES

It was turmoil for a week. It had been a headache for months. The Tyson Fury-Anthony Joshua on, off saga – or was it really ever on? – came to an abrupt end, with the arbitration case overseen by retired judge Daniel Weinstein, who ruled that Fury had to fight Deontay Wilder for a third time. The juggernaut promotion for Saudi Arabia in the summer had hit a huge wall. Eddie Hearn had a headache. A very big one. Bob Arum and Frank Warren threw their arms up in the air. There was shock. The kind of shock-horror that happens when heavyweight title unifications get so mired in paperwork, egos, lawyers and the GIANT CHESS GAME that it was with a sense of relief that the "Gypsy King" and "AJ" indulged in a spat of Twitter name-calling, and it all just settled down again. Plus ça change ...

If the fight happens in December, Fury-Joshua, Joshua-Fury, should they come through their respective interim fights, we will have an even bigger entity on our hands, with a little more enmity this time. Hopefully, sense will prevail and all parties will sit around a very large table this time (film it for us?) and it will be on again. But they both have to win first.

The shirt is almost as loud as the cries for Fury-Joshua, but fans will have to wait ... again.

Wilder claims to be rejuvenated, and I for one am looking forward to the trilogy. Respect Wilder for wanting the fight, not wanting to step aside. The third encounter could go many ways. Fury may have his number. But he may not. Either way, it ought to be an interesting week. At the time of going to press, both Fury and Wilder were reported to have signed the contract (60/40 split in favor of Ring/WBC champion Fury), to fight on July 24 in Las Vegas, venue yet to be confirmed. Traveling bans excepted, either T-Mobile Arena, MGM Grand or – if the masses can move again – potentially Allegiant Stadium, home of the Las Vegas Raiders, an altogether bigger affair.

Joshua slides towards Oleksandr Usyk, the WBO mandatory challenger – another fight without a clear outcome – for a defense in the British summer, needing to show no weaknesses against the smaller but very slick left-handed fighter from Ukraine. That fight could have its moments.

Let the games begin (again) ... whoever the protagonists are. But if boxing's industrial chaos creates the destiny that Fury and Joshua are to meet for the belts, it will be ever bigger. When has it been any different ?

★ ★ ★

Josh Taylor returned to the U.K. in May as the spanking new hero of British boxing, having captured a piece of history with the undisputed junior welterweight title in Las Vegas against Jose Ramirez – but did land on terra firma without his belts, which were lost in transit in Dallas. The Scotsman had the treat of landing at Heathrow Airport and then taking a private jet with his training staff to Edinburgh. When you have joined an exclusive club of one – the only British fighter to have held all the titles in the four-belt era – bauble-carrying pales, perhaps.

"It doesn't matter about the belts," Taylor told me. "They got lost on the way home. I've signed the forms for them to come on. But even if they aren't in my hands, they are my belts. It would have been nice to come home with them, but they'll all get here at some point."

The 30-year-old's two knockdowns of rival Ramirez in Rounds 6 and 7 proved the difference in the Scotsman's history-making

ED MULHOLLAND/MATCHROOM

unanimous points victory, yet there is much, much more to come. Bigger nights, bigger fights. Teofimo Lopez, Terence Crawford, even the Edinburgh homecoming fight. It will be rowdy and raucous, and Taylor has waited long enough for that.

By retaining his Ring, IBF and WBA belts and claiming the WBC and WBO titles from Ramirez, Taylor joined fellow undisputed champ Ken Buchanan exactly 50 years after Buchanan was lightweight king in the two-belt era, in 1971. In just 18 fights undefeated, Taylor has established himself as one of the sport's truly elite fighters, and yet his contest with Ramirez was not aired on one of the main broadcast channels. There has been outrage from boxing fans that it was not picked up by Sky Sports – which recently announced it will air Floyd Mayweather Jr. vs. YouTube star Logan Paul on its pay-per-view platform – with many urging BBC Scotland, Sky Sports or BT Sport to show a replay of Saturday night's absorbing, relentless contest. "I think it should be, definitely," said Taylor. "It was a great fight, history was made, and they should put it on the BBC or Sky or on the main channels so the public can view it."

Taylor was dissatisfied about a brace of issues. "There was the delay to restart after the second knockdown of Ramirez, from referee Kenny Bayless. That could have cost me a stoppage. It was a long time, that count. It was something like 20 seconds. And the judges tried to rob me on the scoring as well. We had a lot of people against me from the start. I didn't want the three judges they selected, because they were biased. But I didn't want to complain too much, because I thought they would try to do me over. Kenny was then on my case the whole time, threatening to take points from me."

The Ring took Taylor from No. 9 to No. 5 (many ratings panelists noted the combined 136-1 record of the Scotsman's last six opponents) on its pound-for-pound list, and there will be harder, more exacting nights and fights ahead. But make no mistake; this is now the moment when the Tartan Tornado can begin to enter the big time.

Gareth A Davies is boxing correspondent for The London Telegraph.

SIMON HOFFMANN

JAPAN

BY YURIKO MIYATA

As an unexpected fourth wave of COVID-19 cases hit Japan, the government imposed its third state of emergency, restricting people's activities in metropolitan prefectures such as Osaka, Hyogo, Kyoto and Tokyo. This extended lockdown was the backdrop to Kenshiro Teraji's eighth defense of the WBC 108-pound title against veteran Tetsuya Hisada in front of the allowable capacity of 2,000 spectators in Osaka on April 24. The Ring's No. 1-rated junior flyweight dropped the 36-year-old challenger with a clean one-two combination in the second round and cruised to a unanimous decision victory.

The fight meant a lot to 29-year-old Teraji (18-0, 10 KOs). His year-and-four-month layoff was not only the result of the pandemic but also a suspension by the Japan Boxing Commission for a drunk driving-related car accident last summer, an infraction that pushed the Hisada defense from its original date in December. Having settled his misdemeanor out of court and completed his three-month suspension with community service ordered by the JBC, the fight went forward.

"I learned a lot," he said. "I know how my stupid behavior disappointed the people supporting me, and I found out how important boxing is to me. In this fight, I really want to show how I've changed and how I appreciate people's support with my performance."

It took a little while for Teraji to shake off the rust from the long absence. Though he decked Hisada (34-11-2, 20 KOs) in the second frame, he didn't seem comfortable and allowed his opponent to battle back in the middle stages of the bout. It was a second chance for Hisada, who gave Ring/WBA 108-pound champion Hiroto Kyoguchi a tough fight in 2019, and he made the most of it.

However, Teraji finally figured out the determined challenger in the later rounds and bloodied his face with right counters and left uppercuts. As the decision was announced, Teraji's signature broad smile was replaced by tears on his face.

"It just poured out; I did not mean to cry in the ring," he said. "But I was so nervous this time. I was fatigued and sore from the 12-round bout after a long recess."

Some saw maturity in the baby-faced champion who had previously not been so good at putting his thoughts into words. That might be a good sign for Teraji, who still has the goal of making 14 defenses of his title, which would break the national record of 13 set by WBA 108-pound champion Yoko Gushiken in 1980.

★ ★ ★

When four-time strawweight titleholder Katsunari Takayama got an offer from Elwin Soto's team to challenge for the Mexican's WBO 108-pound title in the chief supporting fight to the Canelo Alvarez-Billy Joe Saunders event on May 8 in Arlington, Texas, he immediately started calculating how to be ready within three weeks to go 12 rounds for the first time in five years. Turning down the offer never crossed the veteran's mind.

Without time for a full camp and no sparring due to COVID-19 infection risks, and with 13 pounds to lose, the veteran focused on dropping the weight and mentally preparing to go hard rounds in the ring. His team officially signed the fight contract on April 30. They left for Texas on May 3.

"I am experienced," he told the Japanese media at the host hotel in

Dallas. "I've gotten through so many things already in boxing."

Truer words were never said. Takayama's 21-year-career is all about challenges. About 10 years ago, after already collecting the belts of the WBC and WBA (interim), his team started chasing the IBF and WBO titles at the expense of his boxing license in Japan because the JBC did not recognize those two sanctioning bodies at the time. The unconventional road warrior, who fought three times in South Africa, once in the Philippines and twice in Mexico, eventually got his license restored and became the only Japanese boxer to collect title belts from all four major sanctioning organizations. After retiring in 2016 and returning to amateur status in an attempt to compete in the Tokyo Olympics, he returned to the pro ranks in late 2020 (one month after receiving a university degree in education).

"I did my best to get ready like Rocky Balboa did, and I will move like Muhammad Ali in the ring tomorrow," Takayama told the Japanese media the day before stepping into the ring at the center of the gigantic AT&T Stadium.

The former strawweight standout started with quick moves and a barrage of punches, while the compact puncher that is Soto caught him with sharper and much harder right counters and uppercuts. Takayama tried to utilize a body attack to slow down the defending titleholder, who was 13 years younger, but Soto's offense was more convincing and damaging. Takayama was game, but referee Laurence Cole saw the Japanese fighter endure quite a few debilitating shots up close and decided to halt the battle at 2:44 of the ninth round.

"I was not happy about the stoppage," Takayama said in his dressing room after the fight, "but if my performance allowed the referee to stop [the fight], that is what it is. At that moment, I was aware that my work on [Soto's] body was going well, and [I was] thinking that I have three rounds to give it all my energy to turn the fight."

Takayama's words sounded clear and calm. He was proud of himself, having adding another worldly experience to his incomparable career just four days before turning 38 years old.

SOUTH AFRICA

BY DROEKS MALAN

April was a bad month for South African boxing.

The country lost its only world titlist when IBF flyweight boss Moruti Mthalane was outboxed by Sunny Edwards at the York Hall in London. The light-punching but fleet-footed Edwards put on a flawless exhibition as he won by unanimous scores of 118-111, 115-113 and a rather generous shutout of 120-108.

The 38-year-old Mthalane, who was both the oldest man to defend a world flyweight title as well as The Ring's No. 1-rated flyweight going in, did not give up his belt for lack of trying. He pushed hard throughout the fight, but Edwards was just too quick, too busy and too young for the veteran.

Edwards (right) was too slick for Mthalane.

Edwards started the fight by moving, constantly changing direction, landing a light left hook around the gloves of Mthalane and flurrying toward the end of the round. In the second stanza, he got a double jab working, as well as a right that kept Mthalane ever-so-slightly off-balance. Whenever Mthalane landed a hook or a grazing right, Edwards responded by firing off a combination, landing two or three more punches than the champion, then either getting back on his bicycle or pivoting out of harm's way.

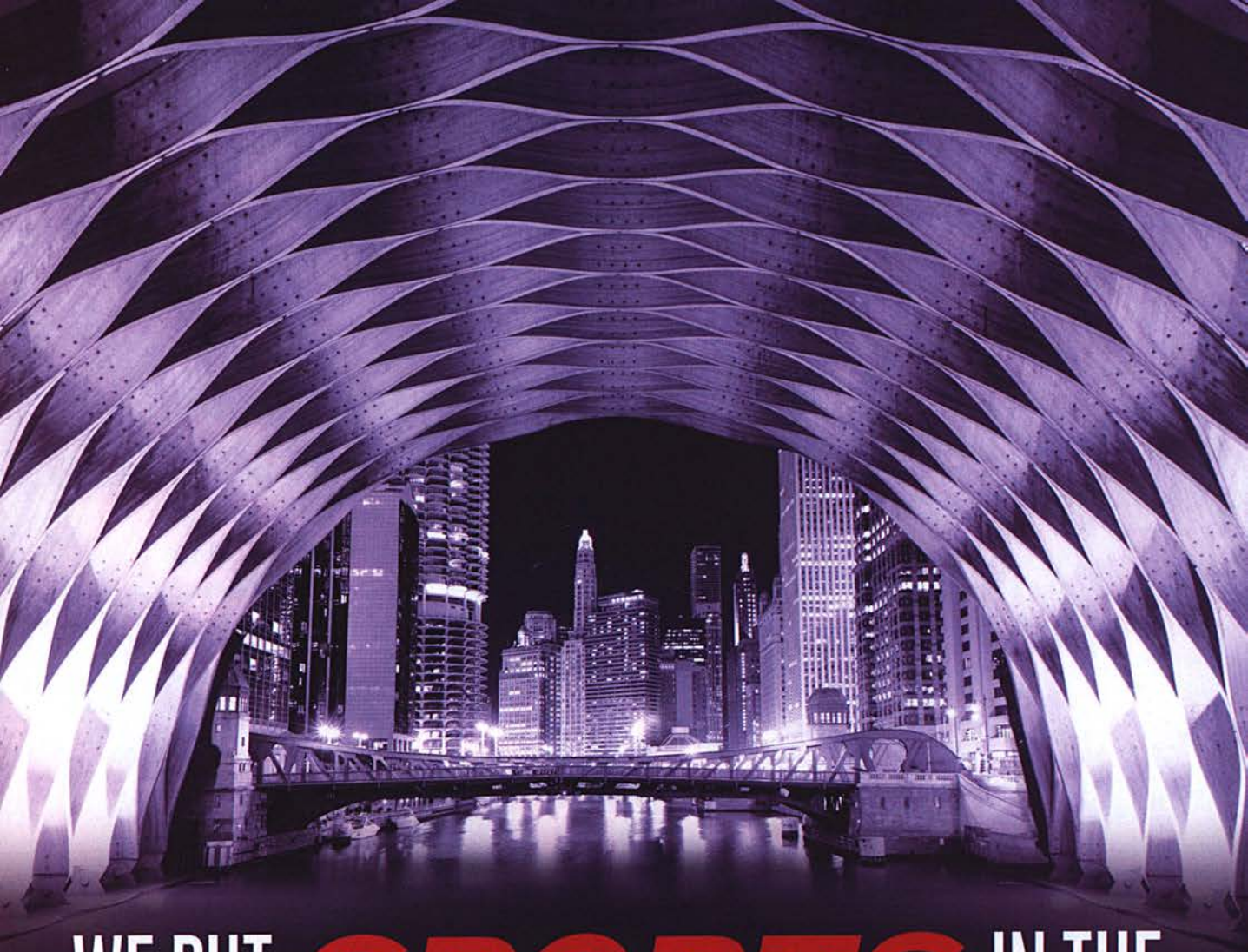
The seventh round was a case in point. Mthalane landed a right, and the switch-hitting Edwards responded with several right hooks of his own before slipping away. He then landed a left hook and a straight right through the gloves, followed by another flurry of three punches to the head and a hook to the body to end the round. Mthalane kept upping the pressure, but he just could not land enough punches to win rounds as Edwards controlled the distance and pace, establishing a substantial lead.

Mthalane finally got some good work done in the ninth, landing some hard shots to the body and a straight right. Still, even though Mthalane did much better in the next three rounds, Edwards would not fall apart and kept his jab and movement going to sit on his lead. Try as he did, Mthalane could not pin the Brit down long enough for a dramatic late-round stoppage. And when it was announced that Edwards had emulated his brother, Charlie, who held the WBC belt in the same division, it came as no surprise.

Edwards, unbeaten but untested before the fight, took a big step up in class, but he had the right game plan and executed it to a tee. He has a bright future.

As for Mthalane, whatever he does from here, he will certainly go down as a South African great. He had a remarkable, perhaps hall-of-fame-worthy career. The loss to Edwards ended a near 13-year unbeaten run that featured two IBF flyweight reigns and included impressive victories over past, future and current world titleholders Julio Cesar Miranda, Zolani Tete, John Riel Casimero and Akira Yaegashi.

It was one hell of a ride.



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THUNDERSTRUCK

Almost 20 years ago, on November 3, 2001, Kostya Tszyu put WBA and WBC junior welterweight titles on the line against IBF counterpart Zab Judah. The vacant Ring Magazine title would also be at stake, and the winner would become the first undisputed champion in the division for 34 years (Japan's Takeshi Fuji held the distinction in 1967). Judah (pictured here with Tszyu after both men retained their titles on the same card) had a great opening round against the powerful Russian-born Aussie but was decked by a vicious right hand at the end of the second and couldn't recover. After regaining his senses, the fiery Brooklynite accosted referee Jay Nady and threw a stool in protest, but "The Thunder from Down Under" exited the MGM Grand in Las Vegas as junior welterweight king.

COMING UP

Jermall Charlo will defend his WBC 160-pound title for the fifth time against Juan Macias Montiel on June 19.

JUNE

JUNE 19 – Naoya Inoue vs. Michael Dasmarinas, bantamweights (for Inoue's Ring/IBF/WBA titles), Las Vegas (ESPN and ESPN+).

JUNE 19 – Teofimo Lopez vs. George Kambosos Jr., lightweights (for Lopez's Ring/IBF/WBA/WBO titles), Miami (Triller PPV). Also, Franchon Crews-Dezurn vs. Elin Cederroos, super middleweights (for vacant Ring, Crews-Dezurn's WBC/WBO and Cederroos' IBF/WBA titles).

JUNE 19 – Jaime Munguia vs. Maciej Sulecki, middleweights, El Paso, Texas (DAZN).

JUNE 19 – Jermall Charlo vs. Juan Macias, middleweights (for Charlo's WBC title), Houston (Showtime).

JUNE 26 – Vasiliy Lomachenko vs. Masayoshi Nakatani, bantamweights, Las Vegas (ESPN+).

JUNE 26 – Mario Barrios vs. Gervonta Davis, junior welterweights, Atlanta (Showtime PPV); Also, Erickson Lubin vs. Jeison Rosario, junior middleweights.

JULY

JULY 3 – Chris Colbert vs. Yuriorkis Gamboa, junior lightweights, Carson, California (Showtime).

JULY 9 – Joseph Diaz Jr. vs. Javier Fortuna, lightweights, Los Angeles (DAZN). Also, Gilberto Ramirez vs. Sullivan Barrera, light heavyweights.

JULY 17 – Jermell Charlo vs. Brian Castano, junior middleweights (for Charlo's Ring/IBF/WBC and Castano's WBO title), location TBA (Showtime).

JULY 24 – Tyson Fury vs. Deontay Wilder, heavyweights (for Fury's Ring/WBC titles), Las Vegas (Fox/ESPN PPV).

AUGUST

AUG. 21 – Manny Pacquiao vs. Errol Spence Jr., welterweights, Las Vegas (Fox PPV).

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